NEW LOOK

EDGE

THE FUTURE OF INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT

BACK TO WORK

After a five-year layoff, Agent 47 returns in a darker, leaner entry in IO's assassin series. The exclusive report begins on p70

INSIDE THE DEADLY WORLD OF **HITMAN: ABSOLUTION**

REVIEWED

CHILD OF EDEN
INFAMOUS 2
LA NOIRE
EL SHADDAI
THE WITCHER 2
BRINK
DIRT 3
BANGAI-O HD
DEAD OR ALIVE: DIMENSIONS

WHAT'S NEXT?

REINVENTING CALL OF DUTY
2021 GAME TECH
NGP ON TEST

£FIVE
#229
JULY 2011

Welcome to the future of interactive entertainment



Thanks to all sorts of research, we know that **Edge** attracts a varied readership. Some of you are in your 20s, while others have been playing games for over 30 years. Many of you make games or have designs on making them in the future, while many others don't work in the game industry at all, and simply appreciate the sense of perspective found within these pages. The common thread that binds together all of **Edge**'s readers is a long-lasting, deeply ingrained passion for games.

With this in mind, it wasn't too much of a stretch to plan out the fourth distinct iteration since the magazine's launch, 18 years ago. After all, we have this long-lasting, deeply ingrained passion for games, too.

In **Edge** version 4.0, then, you'll find a selection of reviews and previews that go into more detail than ever before. Larger, better-quality screenshots, printed on the most expensive paper stock in the magazine's history. More opinions from (with one possible exception) respected voices in the world of gaming. More insight. And Create, a new section dedicated to the stories behind the pixels which should be as interesting to dedicated videogame followers as it is to those who make the things we play. Naturally, despite these changes, there remains a dedication to editorial standards and integrity that has always been among **Edge**'s hallmarks.

In all of this, we'll be celebrating what works, and identifying what's next. And what's next involves the likes of cover game *Hitman: Absolution*, which we examine in detail beginning on p70. It seems appropriate that the first new look for **Edge** in over six years coincides with the return of a character who's been away for nearly as long.

As always, we're interested in your feedback, so let us know what you think of the new magazine via email (edge@futurenet.com), our Facebook page (facebook.com/edgeonline) or Twitter (@edgeonline). And be quick, because we're also lining up a few more new elements for next issue. Before that arrives, you should visit our redesigned Web site, too. ■



games





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EDGE

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GAMING WORLD INSIGHT, INTERROGATION AND INFORMATION



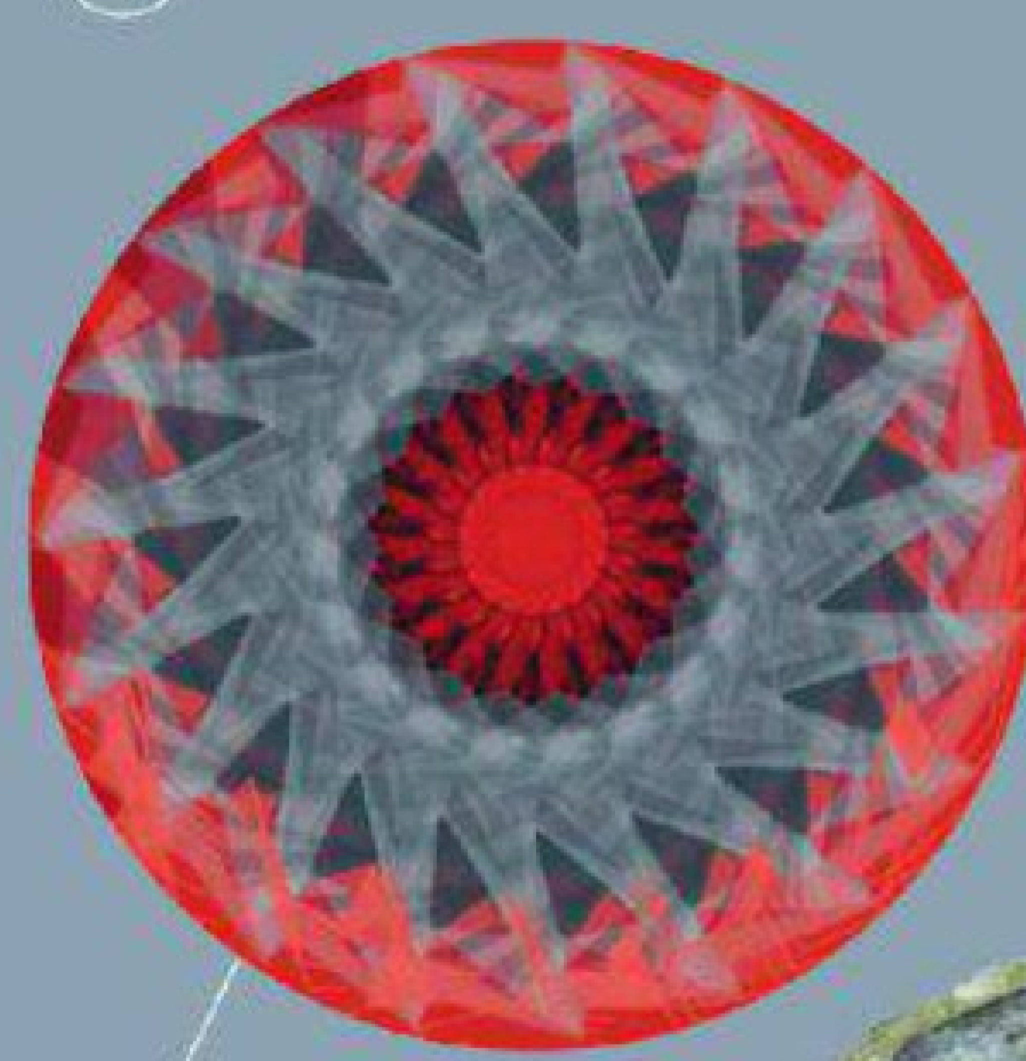


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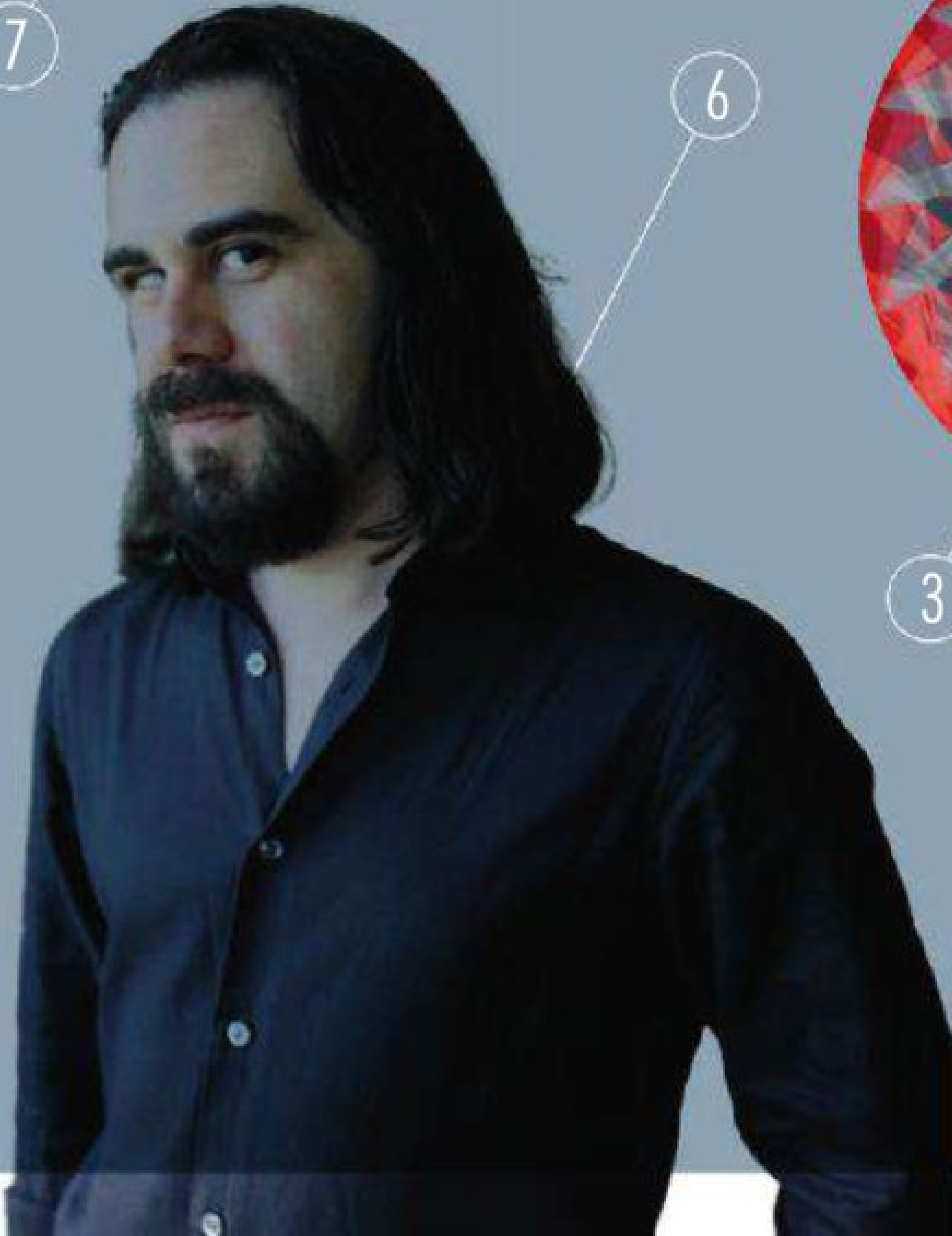


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WLEDGE

Now that Nintendo's 3DS is in millions of homes the world over, it's time to obsess over another piece of handheld hardware on the horizon. Filling the void capably is Sony's NGP (1), which dominates this issue's front section. Our report from our time with a near-final iteration of the feature-packed device, during which we get the opportunity to play a selection of the games that will accompany it at launch later this year, begins on p10. On p14, we consider the future of the *Call Of Duty* franchise, looking at the unconventional unveiling of *Modern Warfare 3* (2) and Activision's plans to make the series an even more essential part of so many players' lives. On p16 we present the first details of Q-Games' *PixelJunk Lifelike* (3), a rhythm-action title that makes innovative use of PlayStation Move controllers to create and interact with music. Now that PSN (4) is back online, we consider what can be learned from hackers' actions against Sony, and the company's response to it. What it means for the platform holder, gamers, developers and the wider world of online entertainment is discussed on p18. Concluding Knowledge, we look at how Gameloft's (5) attack of the clones has reached a new level of intensity (p20), lend an ear to the likes of Ian Bogost (6) in Soundbytes (p22), and finally, in a new regular, go looking for favourite things, beginning with Felicia Day (7) on p24.

bit.ly/IM3xIa
Up-to-the-minute game news and views



Next Generation Promise

It's all about the games in our second encounter with Sony's upcoming NGP



Our first hands-on with NGP earlier this year revealed a cutting-edge piece of hardware that heralded the next step in handheld gaming's trajectory towards home-console-quality visuals and controls. The cornerstone of any gaming platform, of course, is the software, and that was noticeably thin on the ground on NGP's first showing. Would it merely be a case of Next Generation *Potential*?

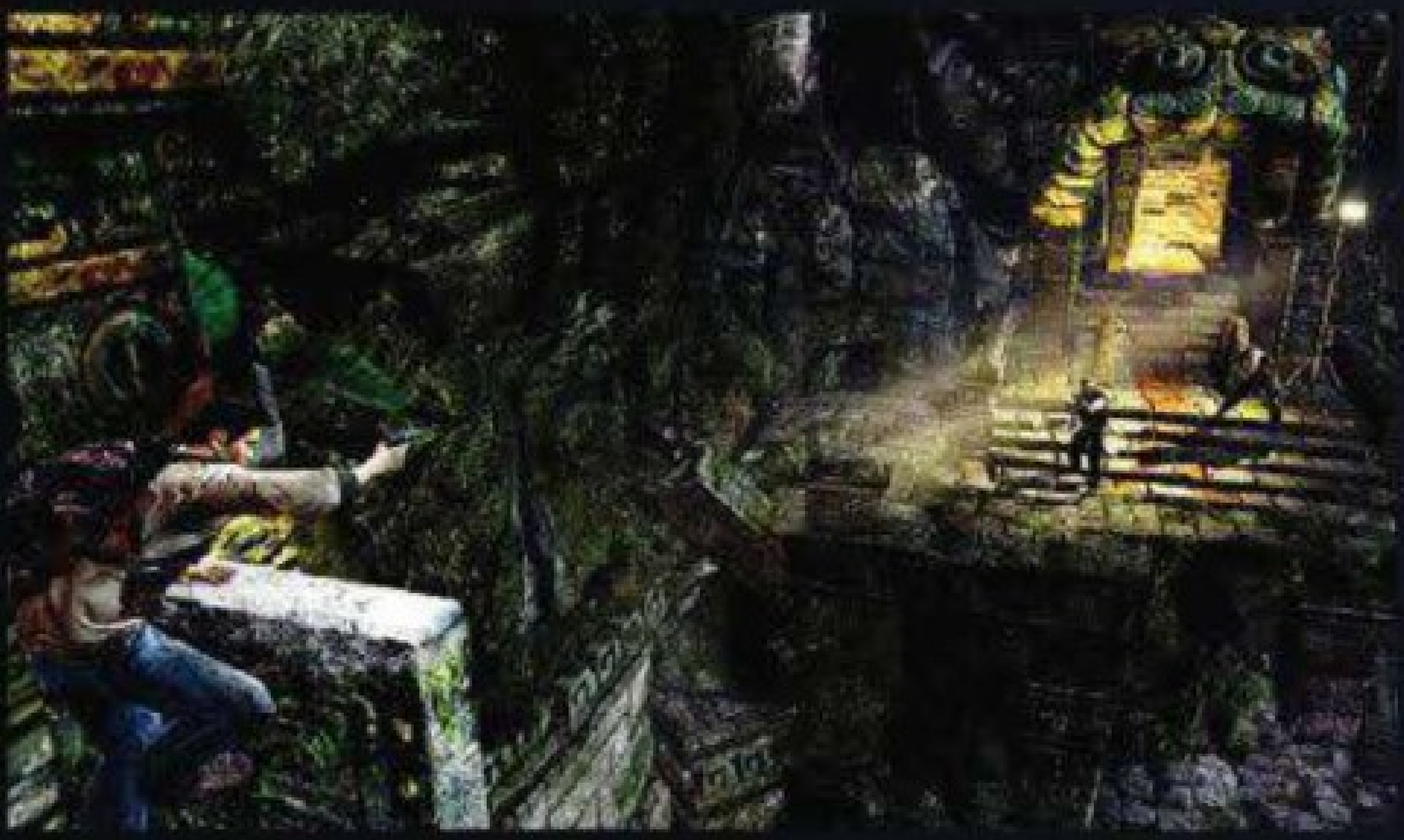
The sands of portable gaming have shifted considerably since PSP made its debut in 2004. With mobile phones now a major force in the market, and Nintendo already first out of the gate with a new generation of hardware, it's crucial that any new offering makes a pitch that modern audiences won't be able to resist. One of NGP's main attractions is its rear-mounted trackpad. On paper it's a bold, unproven direction to take touchscreen gaming. But in practice? In the plush surroundings of a London riverside venue, Sony gets down to business with a wealth of playable titles and, finally, we find out whether or not NGP succeeds at delivering a considered amalgam of cutting-edge technology.

On first contact, NGP feels both familiar and surprising. It's as flyweight as a PSP-2000, and of similar dimensions, but it's a far more robust device, evoking something more akin to Sega's chunky, built-to-last Game Gear than any of Sony's more delicate creations. The unit clearly breaks away from the experiment that was PSP Go, reverting to the original PSP manifesto of high-spec, multi-featured hardware. The features this time, however, orbit around gameplay more than any other multimedia aspirations, and the OLED screen perfectly showcases the NGP's triple-A titles. *Uncharted: Golden Abyss* and *Wipeout 2048*, unsurprisingly, provide the most immediate and striking demonstration of home-console-quality scenes featuring dynamic lighting effects. It's also a remarkably sensitive surface to the touch and, measuring up at five inches, the screen as a whole may be



THE HARDWARE
NGP covers all control bases, offering a five-inch OLED touch screen 1, a rear-mounted track pad, and Sixaxis motion control alongside twin analogue sticks 2, a D-pad 3 and face buttons 4. Games are planned to arrive both on physical media (previously alluded to by SCE WWS president **Shuhei Yoshida** as "cartridges") and via downloads. Though Yoshida tells us that NGP isn't intended to challenge smartphones, but rather provide a "second screen" for owners of both, Sony has clearly learned some lessons from modern mobile hardware, as indicated by the unit's front- and rear-facing cameras.

bit.ly/jo07Np
Full NGP interview with Shuhei Yoshida



UNCHARTED: GOLDEN ABYSS

SCE Bend's pedigree with handheld thirdperson titles might not be jaw-dropping (see *Syphon Filter*), but by inheriting the *Uncharted* franchise for its handheld debut it's at least got a solid cast of characters and a top-tier set of mechanics to translate, if not redefine. *Golden Abyss* is set before *Drake's Fortune* and, though not a true prequel, clearly takes strong artistic inspiration from the ancient locales of Naughty Dog's first title in the series. Navigation can be handled via traditional controls or on the fly by utilising the NGP's new features. Tapping the screen to switch weapons, or to initiate a melee attack, is a convenient shortcut in the heat of battle, albeit one that feels unusual at first – as is the option to stroke ledges onscreen to let Drake know where to clamber next. *Golden Abyss* looks solid, gorgeous and seems to have bottled a good deal of its big brother's lightning.

Publisher SCE **Developer** SCE Bend Studio **Release** TBC



WIPEOUT 2048

The date in the title is key to the latest *Wipeout*'s feel and style. "It keeps the sci-fi more grounded," says game director **Graeme Ankers** as we blaze a trail along Tower, a track that scales a skyscraper. The lower half of the track is a more earthy, rugged place, with tarmac and contemporary buildings conveying the game's near-future timeline. Standard controls offer purists the experience they know well, but it's the motion-control setup that offers something truly different. Touching the rear trackpad accelerates, while tilting the NGP left and right steers your craft. After a lap it's second nature, and forces you to concentrate on the action as you tap the screen to fire off weapons. Crossplatform racing with PS3 users is a tantalising prospect, and a sign of NGP's intended umbilical connection to Sony's flagship console.

Publisher SCE **Developer** Studio Liverpool **Release** TBC



Shuhei Yoshida has outlined an NGP game strategy making use of both physical media and PSN downloads

enough to consider dropping your smartphone as a portable gaming option. The control setup should only hasten the decision.

It's hard to believe it's taken so long to deliver a portable console with twin sticks and rounded shoulder buttons, tailored for index fingers. Of NGP's new features, comfort feels close to the top of the list. Though the analogue sticks are on the small side, they're designed for precision. It's also a pleasure to find them topped with the rubberised texture of DualShock sticks. When you first take command of Nathan Drake, the freedom afforded by camera control mapped to the right stick initially seems like something of a luxury in this context, but soon feels like what it is: a key tool for dealing with the sort of environments that are being built for NGP action games.

> The impression from NGP is that it's a device with the player rather than the 'consumer' in mind

The NGP buttons and D-pad are reminiscent of the original PSP's, but Sony's designers have wisely removed much of the face-button clutter that clogged up the old device. Start, Select and Home are all you'll find to play with on the clean face of NGP, and the position of the headphone socket, near-centre on the underside, is another sensible decision.

The lasting impression from NGP is that it's a device born of lessons learned, with the player rather than the 'consumer' in mind. Each tweak to the original PSP template is welcome, each rearrangement of its furniture an innovation rather than a spring clean. The possibilities it opens up to developers are both exciting and daunting. With so many aspects to design around, how do you stand out from the crowd? Of the titles on show, it's a mixture of the established and the avant garde that make up the best of the bunch. Many of the titles we get to grips with are accompanied by developer's caveats: "It's something we're looking into," they explain of concepts such as circular panoramic photos and terrain scanning. There's a sense that this really is just the beginning of experimentation with NGP and, as such, it's difficult to predict how its functions will be exploited and capitalised on.

Whether the machine succeeds or fails will depend on developers' ingenuity rather than anything as mundane as the porting process. It's possible, and likely, that NGP will be flooded with ports after release (with the PSN library of PSP games available for the device from day one, that's seemingly already taken care of), but it's exciting to find a device so committed to choice – for players and creators – in such a small package. ■





REALITY FIGHTERS

Barcelona-based developer Novorama first stepped into the augmented reality arena with *Invizimals*, a middle-of-the-road attempt to mimic *Pokémon*'s creature battling and marry it to a virtual tabletop fighting game. With *Reality Fighters*, where similar technology sees fights between avatars either on grids or any surface you point the NGP at, the developer builds on the concept with something more intimate and appealing. Though the combat is derivative of any number of 2D fighters, the gimmick is initially eye-catching. Seeing your avatar, mapped with your own face, duke it out on the streets outside is a hilarious and strange experience indeed. Our hands-on time also revealed a more intriguing concept – full 3D photographs usable as in-game environments. Though it's only in the research stage, the addition could add a new dimension to the title and its personalised nature.

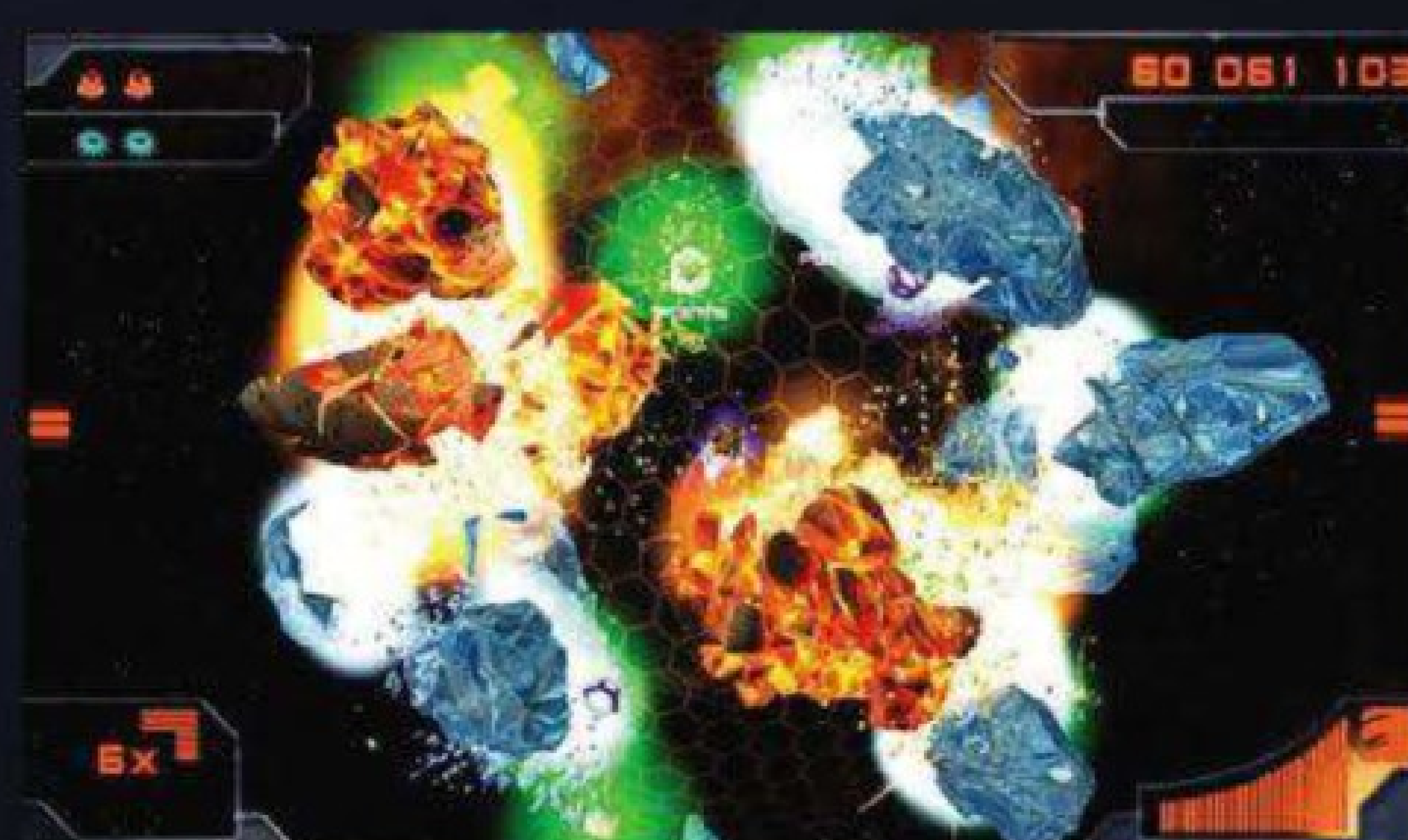
Publisher SCE **Developer** Novorama **Release** TBC

LITTLE DEVIANTS

A minigame collection looking to show off NGP's potential, *Little Deviants* brims with the charm essential to glue its fractured ideas together. The Deviants themselves, jovial little creatures that wouldn't look out of place in *De Blob*'s weird world, must be protected at all costs. In a level titled Hole Roll Control, the rear trackpad raises the floor of an isometric platform, rolling the Deviants around and, hopefully, bringing them to the exit. A free-falling scenario, Depth Charge, requires a single character to be guided to safety by tilting to avoid enemies and obstacles. Augmented reality shooter section Botz Blast is a throwaway, but effective, demonstration of the console's ability to make you spin around and bump into the people next to you. With 20 to 30 minigames proposed for the final product, *LD* will need a lot more ideas to keep you playing beyond these basic offerings.

Publisher SCE **Developer** Bigbig Studios **Release** TBC





EVERYBODY'S GOLF

With the core team of the *Everybody's Golf* franchise hard at work on its NGP iteration, it's no surprise to find it as bright, bold and bubbly as the home console versions. It's a close visual relative to the PS3 game, and the team has chosen to adopt that game's button-based shot system rather than attempt anything Sixaxis-based on grounds of accuracy. NGP's specific features come into play when selecting your intended target, however, with a simple tap of the screen launching you into an isometric view of the course. The course can also be observed with Sixaxis movements, bringing a level of virtual tourism to the title that encourages you to tap to cause water ripples and trigger other environmental quirks. *Everybody's Golf* looks fully capable, even in this pre-alpha stage, of adding some enjoyable, often silly, tweaks to the series' established, robust template.

Publisher SCE **Developer** Clap Hanz **Release** TBC

THE BEST OF THE REST

Also on show were pool and poker game *Hustle Kings*, in which your finger acts as the pool cue, a dazzling slice of arcade shooting in *Super StarDust Delta* (above), and one of the event's highlights: *Sound Shapes*, from *Everyday Shooter* creator Jonathan Mak. A 'music platformer' on the surface, it's an adventure game at heart. Guiding a ball around the *LocoRoco*-style worlds is a smooth, simple joy with the D-pad, but learning the game's rhythm becomes quite a challenge. Enemies attack, vibrate and move to the beat of each level's music, adding a look-and-listen quality to your journey as you time jumps and escapes. There's also huge potential for user-generated content provided by a level-creation tool that allows users to theme levels around their own music libraries. These titles may have lower profiles than the matinee franchises around them, but they represent NGP's ability, and commitment, to appeal to the download and casual markets.

The future of Warfare

We look at what's ahead for the Call Of Duty franchise as the Modern Warfare 3 hype campaign gets off to an unexpected start

What do you get for the person who has everything? It's easy to imagine that Activision has been asking itself a similar version of this question. After eight main entries in the series, the *Call Of Duty* franchise shows no signs of losing momentum, with 2010's *Black Ops* making a headline-grabbing $1 billion+ in revenue. The success of the brand has its roots in Infinity Ward's early, peerless design work – as well as the studio's astute timing in dragging the series out of WWII – but its maintained fanbase can also be attributed to Activision's aggressive, yearly release schedule, as well as the well-oiled hype machine rumbling behind the publisher's doors.

That hype machine took something of knock in May, when a substantial leak resulted in a hefty volume of *Modern Warfare 3* assets and story details being posted online by gaming blog Kotaku. While the publisher has not discussed the leaked details in any detail, it did subsequently release four teaser trailers that supported the content.

"Call Of Duty has steadily grown every single year of its seven-year existence"

The scuppering of a PR campaign is unlikely to be Activision's biggest concern, however. After the high-profile shelving of the *Guitar Hero* franchise, leaked memos revealed the publisher asking itself if *COD* was likely to go the same way, with CEO **Eric Hirshberg** arguing that, unlike the *Hero* series: "*Call Of Duty* has steadily grown every single year of its seven-year existence".

But the question remains: how do you expand a franchise already producing on an annual basis? At an event in San Francisco last month, the publisher lifted the lid on what it clearly sees as the answer to this question: Elite, a *COD*-themed social network, accessible via PC, console or mobile phone, keeping track of a player's career through three tabs – Connect, Compete and Improve.

The Connect tab allows players across all game platforms to find one another via social networking sites like Facebook and to organise into groups and clans. Stat-tracking and leaderboards fall under the Compete tab, which will feature sponsored competitions complete with real-world prizes. The Improve tab will allow players to drill down through a huge number of persistent statistics as well as study and track the tactics of their rivals.

The service will have an open beta over the summer and will be free when it launches in November alongside *MW3*. Activision will also offer a premium membership, which will include enhanced features as well as access to all future DLC. Those who purchase *MW3* will still be able to play online without paying any extra fees. "We do not charge for multiplayer," explains **Jamie Berger**, Activision's VP of digital sales, "and we have no intention of charging for multiplayer." Nonetheless, given that a substantial number of *COD* players are day-one DLC purchasers, it stands to reason that many won't mind paying to sign up for Elite, too.

Elite is an obvious way to capitalise on the prevalence of social networking, and a way of unifying players' experiences across an ever-increasing number of titles. Crucially, it's a direct attempt to capture those currently unprofitable hours that the series' massive fanbase spends away from the games. It's not difficult to imagine a hardcore player using their smartphone to check in and do post-match analysis during a morning commute, for instance, and Berger seems to confirm this vision. "[*COD*] is not even a game any more," he argues, "it's a lifestyle. No different from being a golfer or a marathon runner, there are people out there who are *Call Of Duty* players."



Elite is also a calculated innovation – one that doesn't risk tampering with the games at the series' core. Certainly, the details found in the *MW3* leak suggest a feature-set repeating that of *Modern Warfare 2*'s, The leak did seem to confirm earlier rumours that three studios are working on the title, however – with Sledgehammer Games working with Infinity Ward on *MW3*'s singleplayer, and Raven Software producing the multiplayer component. It's suggestive of a concerted effort on Activision's part to ensure that, despite the mass walkout of Infinity Ward staff in 2010, the series' annual early-November release date is met on time. Hitting shelves in time for Christmas is important for many games, of course, but in the context of the *Call Of Duty* series – whose fans can count on releases to be a predictable, annual event – it's crucial.

Call Of Duty's popularity may not last forever, but that doesn't mean the series is destined to go the way of *Guitar Hero*. Elite may simply be wrapping a social network around a popular online experience, but it has its sights set on cementing the relationship between the series and its most valuable, most coveted asset – its millions of dedicated players. ■

















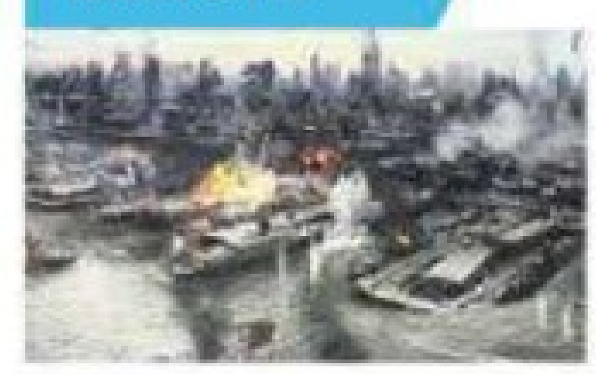




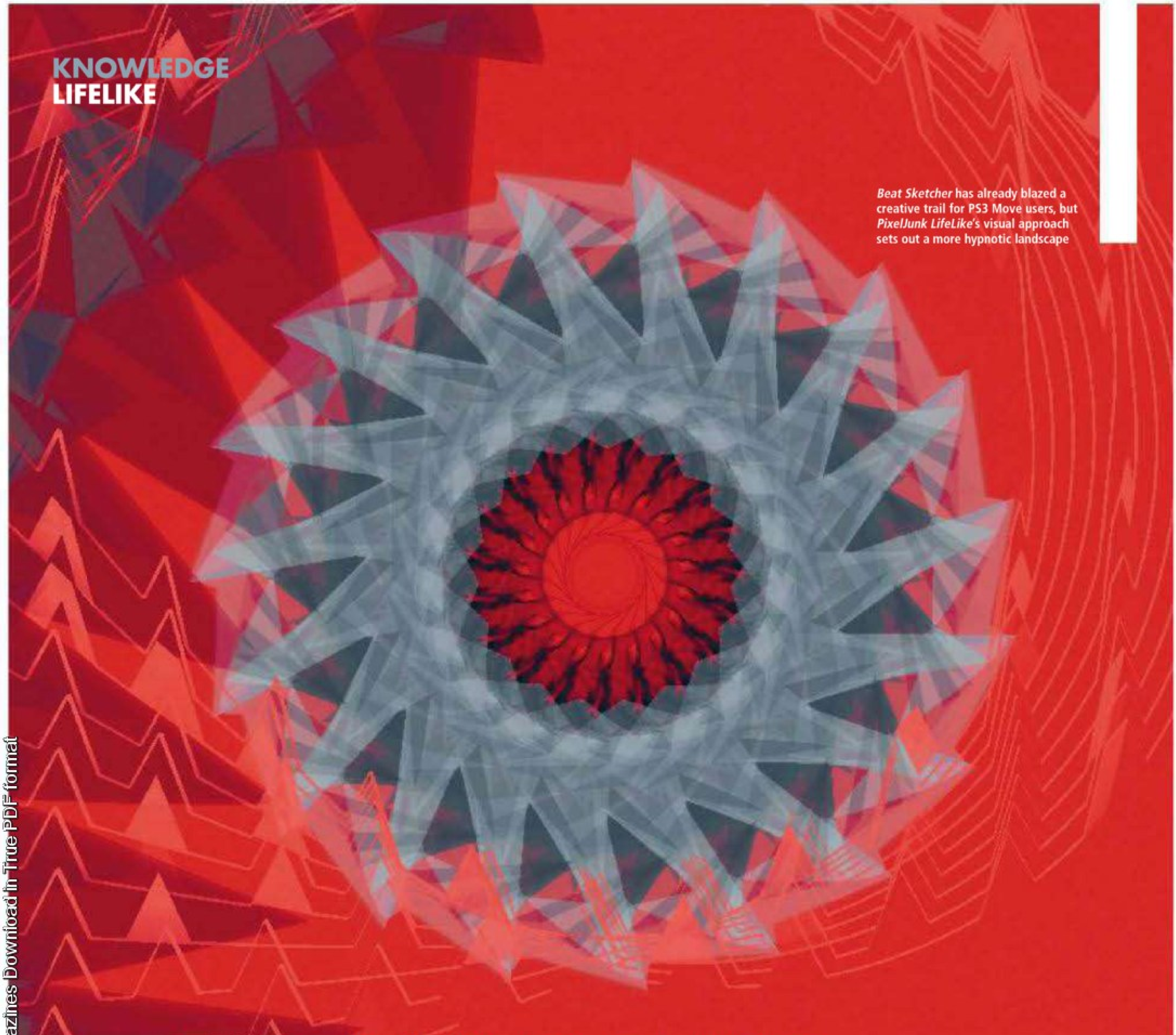


INSIDE LEAKAGE
A broad selection of assets reveal *MW3*'s style and direction… 1 Prague rioters resisting a Russian invasion. 2 After the US Marines and British SAS, *Modern Warfare 3* turns its attention to the US Delta Force. 3 SAS demolition teams will appear, too. 4 Multiplayer skins. The game's weapons apparently include: 5 P99, 6 Striker, 7 MP5, 8 AA12 shotgun, 9 KSG and 10 Magpul FMG foldable machine pistol. 11 Ultranationalist Russian villain Volk

BREAKING COVER
The *Modern Warfare 3* details leaked online



The details revealed in the online leak suggest that *Modern Warfare 3* will begin exactly where its predecessor left off, with series protagonists 'Soap' MacTavish and Captain Price on the run from Russian ultranationalist forces, searching for their leader, Makarov. The game will continue the series' propensity for globe-trotting – albeit with a more European flavour than before: Activision's official trailers confirmed that the UK, France and Germany will appear, with locations such as New York, Sierra Leone and Prague leaked but unconfirmed. *Modern Warfare 2*'s Spec Ops mode, which provided players with sets of increasingly difficult co-operative missions, will also be returning, with the leaked details suggesting that a wave-based survival gametype will be integrated, too.



Beat Sketcher **has already blazed a creative trail for PS3 Move users, but** ***PixelJunk LifeLike*****'s visual approach sets out a more hypnotic landscape**

MOVE WITH THE MUSIC

Q-Games explores a new wave of rhythm gaming with PixelJunk Lifelike

Anyone pondering the ever-sorrier state of the music genre over the past year or so must surely be wondering what new direction or idea might successfully reinvigorate the genre, creatively as much as commercially.


Q-Games' announcement of *Lifelike* at TGS might not have attracted much notice at the time – it was unveiled with a teaser showing Kyoto multimedia artist Baiyon and Q-Games designer Omar dancing in a forest – but now that it's finally being shown in a more fleshed-out form, we're beginning to see a rhythm-action game that blurs the line between music creation and interaction.

Part of the eclectic PixelJunk series, which so far encompasses everything from slot racers to twin-stick shooters to an esoteric ecology simulator that doubles up as a platformer, *Lifelike* is a mix of music visualiser, synthesiser and rhythm game, letting you manipulate sound with PS3 Move controllers like a low-budget Jean Michel Jarre.

The screen shows pulsating colours and shapes that are similar to PS3's on-board music synth (which was also designed by Q-Games), moving in time to whatever's happening on the audio side. The player stands in front of the screen, glowing orb-sticks in hand, and manipulates the sound with movements.

Using the face buttons to switch between different components of the track – bassline, effects, drums, and so on – the player alters and shapes the music with sweeping gestures. Holding the motion controller in front of you, you probe for the sounds you want, throwing in effects with a sweep of the arm. It's like painting with a palette of sound, spread across an invisible easel in the space between your body and the screen, and it's an experience far closer to music creation than beat-matching. The music itself is based on Baiyon's compositions, which vary from house through to chilled ambient electronica and insistent techno, but two people can rearrange the same sonic background into two entirely different tracks.

As one of PlayStation Move's most unusual and, until now, mysterious upcoming titles, PixelJunk Lifelike has the potential to position Q-Games alongside Tetsuya Mizuguchi's similarly named studio Q Entertainment at the forefront of movement-based music gaming. ■


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Sony's harsh lessons

After a lengthy period of downtime, PlayStation 3 consoles are back online, but what did we learn from the PSN crisis?

For 25 days, Sony's PlayStation Network was unusable, closed down following the hostile actions of anonymous hackers. In the wake of the crisis, we identify the key things that can be learned from the outage and Sony's efforts to rectify it:

1. PSN is, frankly, a mess

During a recent interview, we asked Sony Network Entertainment's **Shawn Layden** why Sony had set up a new online division. "Until we started [coalescing all Sony's network activities] a year ago, for every Sony product you had to establish a different relationship – your Bravia relationship, your PlayStation relationship… a lot of that's really entrenched."

Layden validates the outsider's perspective of Sony: that of a series of disparate divisions that happen to work under the same banner. While Xbox Live was built on years of experience in network solutions, PSN has always reflected Sony itself, every feature individually branded and given its own place on the XMB. Compare game updates over PSN with those on Xbox Live: Microsoft's take seconds, but talk to anyone about their first time playing *LBP* and watch a haunted expression settle on their face.

Kaz Hirai's response to a US Congress committee revealed that Sony's PSN backend had 50 separate programs, and admitted the hackers exploited a "system software vulnerability." While any network security engineer would tell you there is no such thing as a secure system, is it any wonder hackers found a flaw?

2. Sony was slow to react

At first pundits accused Sony of belatedly notifying customers that their personal data had been compromised, but its reasoning – that it was working to identify the scope of the damage – appears sound. However, Sony had fair warning. When George 'GeoHot' Hotz published the PS3 root key online in December, Sony told us it would "fix the issues through network updates."

But all these updates did was keep pirates who were running older firmware from accessing PSN. Hacker attention immediately turned to PSN itself, yet it appears Sony did nothing to step up security. Nor did it when 'hacktivist' group Anonymous set Sony in its sights, nor when a series of DDOS attacks took PSN down for a day.

Sony's internal security resources appear minimal: Kaz Hirai told the US Congress that, when the attack was first spotted, his staff were distracted –



Press Association Images

deliberately, he suggested – by Anonymous' DDOS attacks. Sony noticed the intrusion on April 19; Anonymous announced it was ceasing operations, after a backlash from users, on April 12. It took Sony six days and three external security firms to confirm that personal data had been taken.

3. E-commerce is not nearly as safe as consumers expect

Sony acted properly in its handling of credit card data, with details encrypted and CVV security codes not stored on its servers, and insists it has found no evidence of theft. Regardless, it prompts a rethink about how readily we give up our personal information online.

Using the same password across multiple sites has to be addressed (see 'Password reset'), and Sony may consider following Microsoft's lead in adding PayPal as an option. While helping Microsoft reach international markets and those without credit cards, it arguably offers a more secure system.

Lawmakers in the US and Australia are exploring legislation to ensure consumers are promptly notified of data breaches, and Sony has called on law enforcement to more rigorously pursue hackers to serve as a deterrent.

PASSWORD RESET

As we send to press, reports have emerged that an exploit on Sony's password reset page allows people to change users' passwords using only a PSN account email and date of birth – both of which were stolen in the original hacking attack. Following the revelation, PSN sign-in was taken offline on a number of Sony's sites and the password reset website was also taken down. "Unfortunately this also means that those who are still trying to change their password via Playstation.com will be unable to do so for the time being," said a Sony statement. "At present it is unclear how long this will take."

bit.ly/lZQ6r6
Extensive coverage of the PSN crisis

4. Sony has lost more than data

It has lost trust as well. On May 1, its chief information officer **Shinji Hasejima** admitted: "The [network] vulnerability was a known vulnerability. But Sony was not aware of it… was not convinced of it." An internal source told Eurogamer that an exploit that allowed pirates to download PSN games using fake credit card details was "known about for years" but went "unaddressed based on the belief that the PS3 was unhackable." SOE proudly proclaimed that it was unscathed following the attack, only to admit days later that the details of 25 million users had been taken.

> "It took Sony six days and three external security firms to confirm that personal data had been taken"

How many users will happily enter financial information now the service has been restored? How many developers will make their downloadable game a PSN exclusive? Rebuilding its online service may have taken Sony weeks, but restoring confidence could take years.

5. Sony may never be the same

As we went to press, Sony had outlined its plan to compensate US and some European users for the downtime. In relative terms, offering two free PSN games doesn't incur much of a cost, but we can only wonder how much the ID protection policies for its millions of account holders will set Sony back – and it still has to sort out the rest of the world. Its legal bills look set to mount too, with class-action proceedings underway in the US and Canada.

Sony chairman Howard Stringer kept his counsel until the downtime entered a third week and Sony saw light at the end of the tunnel. Stringer's pledge to "welcome you back to the fun" sorely damaged his standing when Sony further delayed PSN's return, and fund managers unaffiliated with Sony have suggested he step down. Should investors sitting on Sony stock voice similar concerns, he may have no choice but to resign.

Hirai, as president and CEO of SCE and chairman of SCEA, has been in the firing line throughout. It was he who bowed and apologised at a Tokyo press conference, he who signed the eight-page response to Congress. He has long been tipped as Stringer's successor, but as the public face of the biggest public-relations disaster in Sony's rich history, that may have changed.

Perhaps all is not lost. In rebuilding PSN from the ground up, Sony is rumoured to be looking not just at securing its online service, but also at adding new features to encourage users back online. The arrogance of the past is surely gone, its top brass doubtless now aware of the importance of robust online services, and that all Sony divisions need to work together to repair a thoroughly damaged brand. Perhaps, in other words, Layden's job just got a little easier. ■



Executive vice president Kazuo Hirai (centre), accompanied by company executives Shiro Kambe (left) and Shinji Hasejima, deliver PSN apologies at Sony's press conference on May 1

Love and theft

Gameloft's unashamed knockoffs are occasionally good, but are they ethical, and when does a game go from tribute to thievery?



Michel Guillemot, CEO, Gameloft



If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, mobile-game developer Gameloft has turned the practice of flattering triple-A game developers into a lucrative business model. The firm's latest project, *Order & Chaos Online* – a shameless *World of Warcraft* clone – might be one of the App Store's guiltiest pleasures. Every last detail from fonts, character design and landscape to quest structure and tech tree: this is the developer's most brazen 'homage' yet and arguably its most successful, a step up from the barebones Flash ports saturating the market. The requirement of a Wi-Fi connection to play is annoying, but the massive scale, consistent framerate, and – most remarkably – intuitive controls, have secured *Order & Chaos Online* critical and commercial success on iOS within its first several weeks on sale.

The prospect of microtransactions combined with a moreish genre proved too much for Gameloft to resist. *Order & Chaos* also features a mini-subscription cost of 59p per month (after the first three months), and some not-so-mini in-app currency bundles. According to Apple's statistics, the most popular purchase is a pack of six gold, which sets you back £3, a cruel convenience given the high cost of death and deviously spiked learning curve. It's no wonder there's already an Android port in production.

Gameloft CEO **Michel Guillemot** waves away accusations of IP copyright infringement, claiming: "The videogame industry has always played around a limited number of themes. There is maybe one new idea a year." While we wait for the publisher to acknowledge our interview request, let's take a moment to ask the question: Is there anywhere Gameloft fears to re-tread? ■



ORDER & CHAOS ONLINE
Obvious inspiration *World Of Warcraft*
Bit too familiar Character races include orcs, elves, humans and the undead; microtransactions; cartoony art style; ability crafting and quest structure we've seen before



SHADOW GUARDIAN
Obvious inspiration *Uncharted* series
Bit too familiar Rakishly handsome treasure-hunting hero; jungle ruins; climbing sections with steep overhead camera angles; helicopter battle in Indonesian cityscape



HERO OF SPARTA
Obvious inspiration *God Of War* series
Bit too familiar Hacking and slashing through minotaurs and other mythological beasties; defiant showdowns with Greek gods; QTE finishing moves



ETERNAL LEGACY
Obvious inspiration *Final Fantasy* series
Bit too familiar Egregiously bad voice acting; Buster Sword twin; spiky grey emo hair (see far left); turn-based RPG combat; medieval-futurist aesthetic; post-victory weapon pose



SACRED ODYSSEY
Obvious inspiration *Zelda: Ocarina Of Time*
Bit too familiar Smashing pots; hero's horses named Miya and Moto; puzzle-packed dungeons that culminate in epic boss battles; hero grunts with sword-swiping exertion



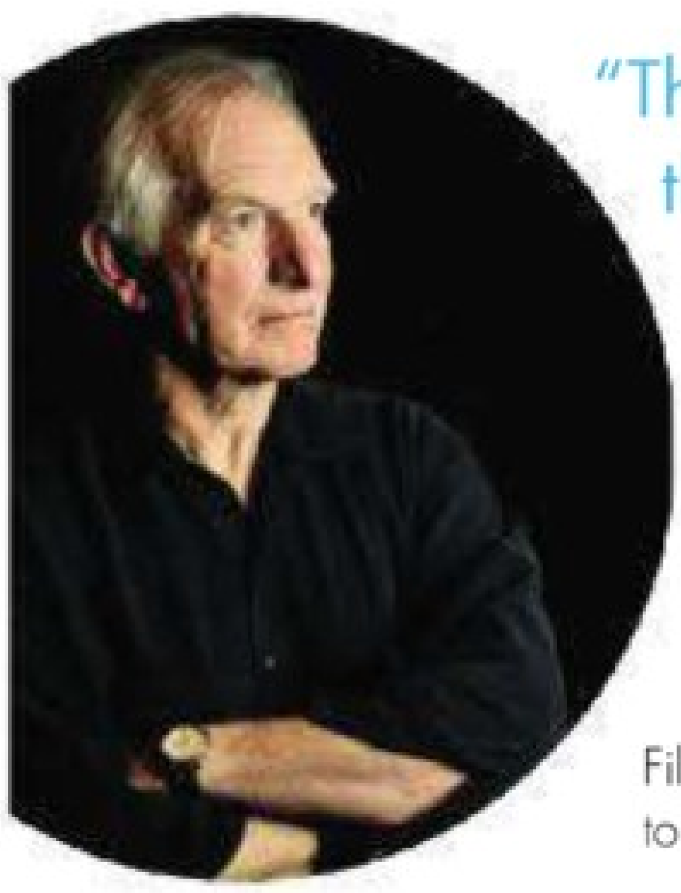
N.O.V.A.
Obvious inspiration *Halo* series
Bit too familiar Recognisable enemy types; reflective-visored space marines; regenerating shield bar; assault rifle design; female AI guide who's a fetching shade of blue



SHIFT 2 UNLEASHED
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Fibre optic broadband from Virgin Media. Game on.
Discover broadband that's an incredible seven times faster than the UK average download speed.[v] Up to 50Mb. Only from Virgin Media.
▶ Lightning-fast downloads mean less time in the pits.
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Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



Jim Smeal/BEI/Rex Features

"The major change is something we can't assess yet: it's the effect of playing videogames from a very young age. **Games emphasise scenes, not stories,** and characterisation suffers dramatically."

Film director **Peter (The Truman Show) Weir** suggests that exposure to gaming may produce a generation unable to engage with movies



"Stop looking for 'legal' or 'official' declarations of games as art. Art is weird. Games are weird. Things are weird. Get over it."

Cow Clicker creator **Ian Bogost** has already made his contribution, of course



"Game hint books are great for kids – info they can USE. **It warms my heart** to see my son curled up with his nose buried in a big book."

Perhaps its inability to run even *Wolfenstein* puts **John Carmack** off Amazon's Kindle



"I am writing code to make my balls explode."

Llamasoft's **Jeff Minter** is making a game with balls in it. (We, er, hope)

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Dead Heat
Manufacturer Namco Bandai

The influence of social networks is permeating every pore of modern gaming, and with Namco Bandai's *Dead Heat*, the personal touch comes to the arcade scene.

The cabinet's PIN system, by which a personal ID number is entered to store stats for future games, establishes the sense of *Dead Heat* as a pursuit rather than a one-off distraction. Rivals are stored to profiles as 'friends', with their ghosts available for private practice sessions, reinforcing Namco Bandai's vision for the game as something more than throwaway coin-fodder.

A back-to-basics arcade racer (in contrast to the more intricate street racing of Namco's *Maximum Tune*), the *Dead Heat* cabinet takes your mugshot before dropping you on to some meticulously recreated western city streets. Like various coin-ops of recent years, the game displays photos above vehicles in the heat of battle, a neat gimmick that shortcuts the crucial seconds players take to find out whose fender they're bending, and especially useful in a game of *Dead Heat*'s blistering speed.

In providing compensation for a basic core experience by inviting you to create your own narrative within it, *Dead Heat* presents an interesting proposition for arcade racers. In learning tricks from social gaming, Namco may have discovered a way to keep players coming back.

One innovation western audiences won't get the chance to sample, unfortunately, is the game's stereoscopic 3D mode, which is only available on the Japanese flavour of the cabinet, named *Maximum Heat*.




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windows.co.uk/thecollection
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My Favourite Game
Felicia Day

The Queen Geek waxes nostalgic over Commodore's Amiga and pines for the old days of eight-hour WOW marathons

Felicia Day is a serial overachiever, the kind of person you might resent if she didn't have such a disarmingly likeable manner. The 32-year-old actor, writer and producer has created her own successful original web series The Guild (inspired by her obsession with *World Of Warcraft*), contributed voice acting to *Fallout: New Vegas*, and worked with BioWare to create a dramatic extension of the *Dragon Age* universe. Now, she's even achieved the status of becoming the first subject of a new section in **Edge**.

What's your earliest gaming memory?
Probably getting yelled at by my mum because I ran up a $400 bill on the Sierra helpline, which cost something like $4 a minute. I couldn't get through many of the puzzles – because I was probably too young. Come to think of it, I actually got yelled at two times. Before the Sierra helpline incident it was dialling up Compuserve and getting hints for Infocom's *Leather Goddesses Of Phobos*, and that was like another $400, because it was about $2 a minute to dial up to Compuserve at the time. So that was my most vivid early gaming memory, the trauma of being yelled at.

Did you own a console as a kid or were you always drawn to PC gaming?
Yeah, I was on the little PC which only had green text on it, and then we upgraded to an Amiga when I was about seven years old. So my formative gaming was done on an Amiga, which was like the nerdy version of a PC. And probably nobody knows what an Amiga is now, so I'm really dating myself. But yeah, all of my games were on the Amiga because for some reason my mother thought getting a console was bad for me – that I would play games too much. We had an Atari 2600, but we got an Amiga, so that was like really advanced gaming. That's what introduced me to *SimCity* and *The Faery Tale Adventure*, which was the first RPG that I ever played, and made me think: 'This is the most amazing thing ever – I can walk around anywhere I want and do whatever I want all day!'

DAY IN DETAIL
Felicia Day is in the midst of shooting season five of her popular web comedy The Guild, finishing up post-production on Dragon Age Redemption (airing this summer), which she wrote, produced and plays the starring role in. She's also acting full-time on the SyFy network show Eureka. She blogs at feliciaday.com and can be followed on Twitter @feliciaday.



Are there any particular developers whose work you follow?
I'm interested in pretty much anything that Valve does. There are definitely developers and people that I know that no matter what they do – even if it's a game that's kind of out of my wheelhouse – it's going to be so well done, not to mention a social experience to share with other gamers, really, because so many people will be playing that game at the same time. There's this quality and attention to detail and world-building that's so rich, and obviously curated, that you can't help but be sucked into their experiences. And you know, Richard Garriott, from *Ultima* times, I mean I've always been obsessed with that guy. One day I hope to meet him in person.

> "Richard Garriott, I mean I've always been obsessed with that guy. One day I hope to meet him in person"

What's your gaming platform of choice?
I used to be more of a PC person, but, to be honest, now I'd really rather play on my Xbox because I've got a really nice setup in the back of my house, with a big TV and I kind of enjoy seeing the bigger screen – it's a little more immersive, and, if you're playing *Left 4 Dead* [below left], it's a lot more frightening. So, yeah, obviously the kind of game can determine the platform – clearly you can't play *Civ 5* on the Xbox with a big screen like that and MMOs don't run very well on there, so it just depends what the game is, what kind of mood I'm in, and what time commitment I have. The casual games don't translate as well, although playing *Bejeweled* on Xbox isn't a bad experience.

What kind of PC are you using at the moment?
One of the other actors on The Guild was using my PC desktop and dropped it in the middle of a take during season four – yeah, that was fun. So now I'm using an 11-inch Alienware, which I just need an external monitor to hook up to. If I really needed a big desktop, that would imply that I would have a lot of time on my hands, and I don't know when that's going to happen! I long for the days when I had eight hours a day to just play *WOW*. Honestly, if I could just get a month of that I think my energy level would be much more positive.

OK, moment of truth: favourite game of all time?
Ultima VII. It's the game that started my immense love and fandom of videogames in the first place. ■



bit.ly/iCRiKg
More of Felicia Day's favourite gaming things

Even though she's best known in gaming for her acting, Day is also an accomplished violinist and classically trained singer

Emily Ibarra

WEB SITE

A Brief History Of The Home Video Game Console
thegameconsole.com

Offering informed, concise rundowns of all the major consoles from 1972's Magnavox Odyssey (which predated Atari's home *Pong* system, as Nolan Bushnell's many detractors are always eager to stress) to the current generation of hardware, ABHOTHVGC also hosts photography of each console along with its original packaging, featuring some beautifully awful boxart (yes, you, RCA Studio II).

There's a clear, fascinating through-line to be observed by scrolling the archived material. From the stylistic similarities between the Fairchild Channel F handset and current motion controllers, to Nintendo's first scaling-down experiment with the top-loading NES Model 2, it's a reminder of how much the present owes the past.





VIDEO

Top 50 Worst Video Game Voices (Dean's Face Acting)
bit.ly/deansface

Watching Dean Lauderdale's video is not unlike poking through a dusty attic packed with releases you long ago forgot – or don't even remember in the first place: "It hurts a bit, but I can walk!" squeals an unknown female voice from the equally obscure PS1 title *Countdown Vampires*. Salvaging these performances is the video's star, lip-synching flamboyantly with a diverse range of gleeful gurns in a noble attempt to reconcile acting and dialogue.

WEB GAME

Super Treadmill
bit.ly/stread

A fitness game that requires no physical exertion is somewhat of a relief in the age of Balance Boards, motion control and BMI scrutiny. *Super Treadmill* is a glorious throwback to the NES days of D-pad platforming, and manages to be both challenging and rewarding without descending into a self-indulgent spoof.

You begin each level with a paunch and a mission: complete the workout on your giant treadmill, avoiding the obstacles that drop down and adapting to variables such as sudden changes in direction and fabricated television interference.

Old-fashioned, basic and occasionally unfair, *Super Treadmill* honours its influences appropriately, delivering a short, silly burst of reaction-based play.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

A sprinkling of things that tugged at our attention during the production of E229

BOOK

The Art Of Immersion by Frank Rose (WW Norton)

Veteran technology-and-entertainment journalist Frank Rose offers an astute yet digestible account of how the Internet's hyperlinked DNA has infected narrative in traditional media, exploring how franchises have heightened immersion by making use of multiple platforms and even divesting authorial control (for example, allowing super-fans of the TV show Mad Men to tweet under the guise of the show's main characters). Readers with a deep knowledge of games, social media and ARGs, however, may weary of – or worse, feel patronised by – Rose's habit of unpacking the basics for the uninitiated reader's benefit. Have you heard of this game, by any chance, this *Metal Gear Solid*?



continue	quit
Free games Compensation for the PSN outage? They know us too well	**360+ ads** Just remind us: Xbox Live *is* a paid-for service, right?
Spring cycling Reminds us of playing *Okami* really, really slowly	**Spring cleaning** Look, these ancient AD&D modules will be handy one day
Futura Our favourite font (for this week). As you've probably noticed	**Q Type** Ah, we had some fun times there for a while, hmm? Well, usually
Redesigns For filling us with enthusiasm and the spirit of enterprise	**Redesigns** For filling us with too many burgers, noodles and cheap cocktails

TWEETS

On one hand, PSN hackers may now have your credit card. On the other hand, now they know when AND where to send your birthday present!
@jasonschreier

Sony's best *Portal 2* marketing tie-in has to be putting Wheatley in charge of PSN. Brilliant!
@wilshipley

OH DEAR LORD NOT THE TROPHIES! Take my information if you must, but not the trophies! (Also please not the credit card details.)
@KenY2Ken

Nintendo are once again claiming we have stole one of their ideas. They claim to have the patent on "barely/non-functional online modes".
@KazHiraiSCE

Ignore rumors that PSN will begin charging a monthly fee. We have no idea how to implement that.
@Fake_PSN



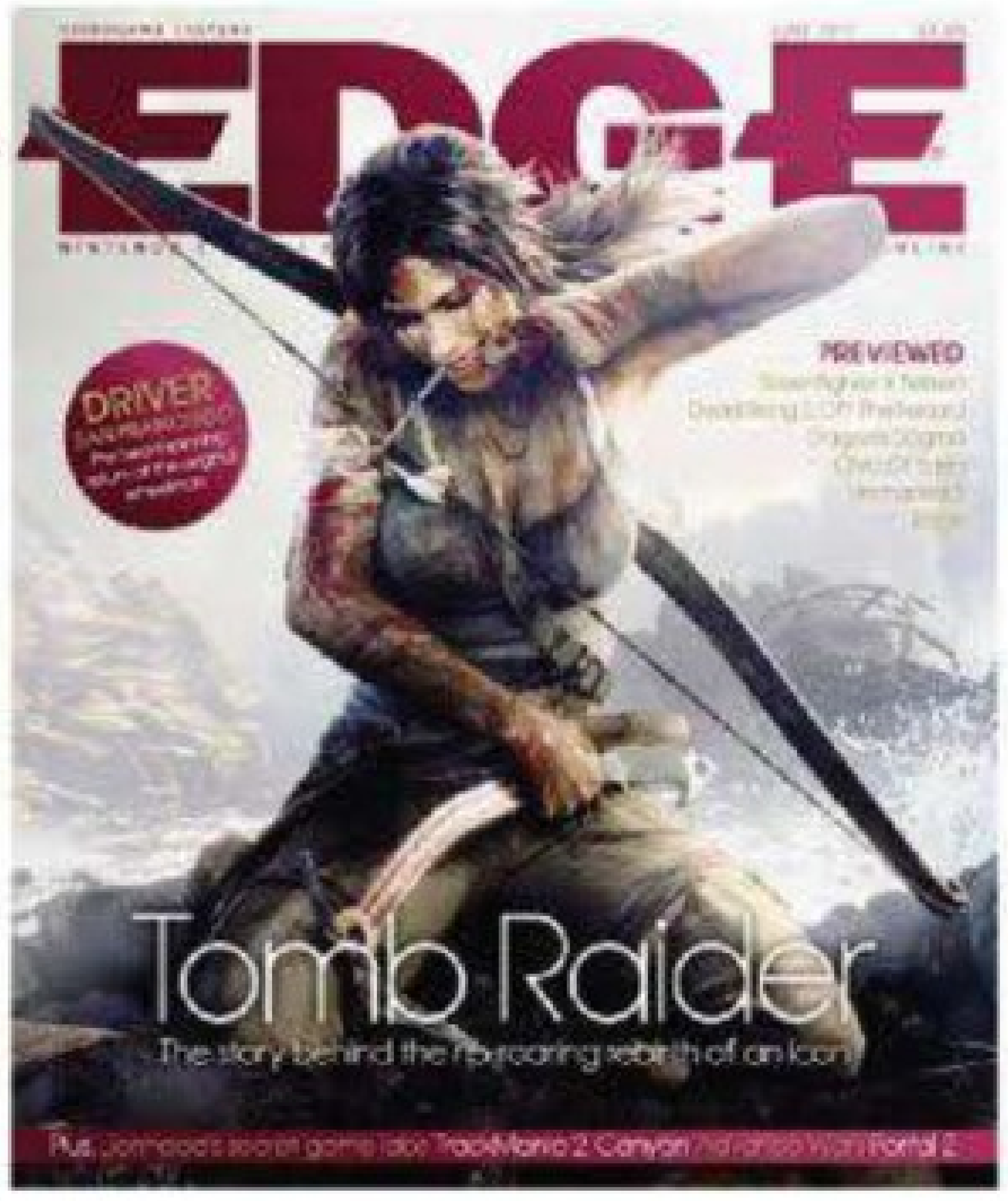
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OWN THE M17X. OWN YOUR OPPONENTS.
From HD to 3D, this processor can handle it. Top-of-the-line performance you can both see and feel. The 2nd generation Intel® Core™ i7 processor. Visibly smart performance at its best.
• Glasses are required to view 3D content
• NVIDIA 3D vision glasses sold separately
Own it at www.alienware.co.uk
intel inside
CORE i7
Visibly Smart
NEW

DISPATCHES JULY

Welcome to the part of the magazine assembled from the views of **Edge**'s readership and columnists old and new. Within Dispatches this month, Dialogue provides a forum for your views on excessive gunplay, the target audience for modern games, the trouble with honourable conduct, and the nuances of *Castlevania: Lord Of Shadow*. In Perspective, **Steven Poole**  addresses identity in gaming, we welcome **Leigh Alexander**  to discuss the pitfalls of fandom, and **Clement Ohio**  fires a volley of corporate wisdom from the top.

www.facebook.com/edgeonline
Edge's Facebook page



Issue 228

Dialogue



Send your views to edge@futurenet.com, using 'Dialogue' as the subject. Our letter of the month wins a 3DS

Hiding a reputation

Is it just me who's getting a little fatigued with reputation systems in games? The good and evil choices. Being a renegade or paragon. Getting good karma and bad karma. Becoming honourable or dishonourable. They're fantastic systems on the whole, and they can completely change one player's game experience from another's, but I'm finding that they negatively affect the game at times.

It became apparent when I was reading the *Prey 2* article in **E**227. Chris Rhinehart, the project lead, starts talking about one of these systems, where if you are a ruthless or honourable bounty hunter, people will react accordingly. Giving examples such as if you were to draw your weaponry near civilians, they would be frightened if you were known as a ruthless bounty hunter. Now surely, as a bounty hunter, you'd go to great lengths to keep your profession a secret? It's not like you're going be advertised on billboards and people are going say, "Oh, I wouldn't trust that bounty hunter: I heard he killed his contractor for extra money." So why would drawing your weapon in front of civilians make the outcome any different? More importantly, how do they know you're a bounty hunter? Wouldn't it make your job a little difficult if everyone knew you assassinate people? Surely they'd just think you're some random nutjob whipping out a weapon and become frightened regardless?

Not to rag on *Prey 2* too much, as I'm really looking forward to it, but these reputation elements seem to be affecting the core gameplay in a strange way. I think that they should be included within games, but in a more toned-down way. At the moment it seems to make people play as a goodie or a baddie. A player wanting to be 'good' may choose to do something because they would gain goodie points, not because they actually wanted to do it.

When these systems are implemented, I think they should be hidden behind the scenes, instead of shown onscreen non-stop. I liked that *GTAIV* didn't have such a system, and when I came to play *Red Dead Redemption*, I found the fame system a little unenjoyable. Sure, I hog-tied an innocent guy and chucked him off a cliff just to get his horse, but why does the game have to shove a '-50' sign on the screen and let everyone else on the other side of the game world suddenly know about it? In some ways it's more realistic – I get that – but is it really more enjoyable?
steebgreeb

It's still early days for morality systems in gaming, and we're optimistic about breakthroughs in the future. In the meantime, take a look at *Infamous 2* (p106) if you want another example of getting it a bit wrong.

Ill wind blowing

I just wanted to heap some praise on **Clint Hocking**'s column in Issue 226.

In it, he refers to our need to move away from a male-dominated game development industry, as it typically leads to a destructive, Viking-like mentality. Specifically, he highlights the overabundance of fart jokes in games today. The truth of this comment came crashing down on me today while I watched the latest promotional video for *Red Faction: Armageddon* called Mr Toots. Mr Toots is a handheld unicorn that shoots rainbow lasers out of its arse. It will be unlocked after the demo is downloaded one million times.

Clint Hocking's column has made me realise that maybe I'm not the only one who thinks that fart jokes are a creatively lazy tool. My desire to play this game has just dropped a fair bit (although I'll probably still buy it). I just wish that they had chosen to go down a more mature route for marketing this game. Are teenage boys the only people who purchase games any more? It seems as though they're the main target audience for the games that I like to play.
Matt Moss

The problem is that it's a whole lot easier to pump out a fart gag than it is to craft something a little more existentialist, no? Also, Clint Hocking is a big Mr Ploppy Pants.

Difficulty decisions

I write in response to Anand Modha's *Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow* anecdote in **E**227, as it reminded me of a few of my own experiences with the game. Despite hearing stories from colleagues about how they've retreated to more accessible games as they've grown older, there's still a part of me that gets a sense of nostalgic satisfaction from something such as *Lords Of Shadow*.

The mechanics for the combat felt restrictive and slow to begin with (although I've made similar remarks about many thirdperson action games since *Bayonetta*), while the design of the bosses often convinced me that someone at MercurySteam thought a ground-pounding shockwave attack should be standard issue rather than a special attack for a certain enemy. However, since I'm blessed/cursed with a high patience threshold, I saw the game through to the very end, under the default difficulty. While the fantastic environments and engaging characters undoubtedly helped inspire me to persevere, there was also a part of me that forcefully insisted, after every restart, that I could do better. After reading Anand's letter I got the impression that he felt the same – the blame was with the player rather than the game.

Does *Lords Of Shadow* deserve credit for making players feel responsible for their own failures, rather than being punishingly unfair? Am I missing the point for

stubbornly playing through a game that I may have found much more enjoyable on an easier difficulty mode? It depends on the perspective of the individual and what he or she wants from a game. An overly punishing title is hard to enjoy, but so is a hand-holding cakewalk. Maybe the best remedy is to take a step back from the game for a while – play games you know you can immediately enjoy, remind yourself why you invest so much time in your hobby, before returning with new enthusiasm. Gabriel will still be there when you come back.
Dan Gassis

A small band of ageing friends of **Edge** have taken to playing every new game they buy at the easiest possible difficulty setting, claiming it to be the best decision they've made in years. If any of our other less-sprightly readers dare to give it a try, let us know how it affects your enjoyment.



Steebgreeb supports *GTAIV*'s approach to morality in gaming

Put the guns away

I was extremely interested to read **Edge** writers, psychologists and Randy Smith reflecting on issues of violence in computer games [**E**227, **E**228]. It's a subject that has been on my mind recently after playing through two very different games – *Dead Space 2* and *Deadly Premonition*. Both, I felt, were bogged down by a reliance on combat systems and violence.

In *DS2*, the combat system is undeniably rock-solid, a mechanical triumph. The first encounter with the Stalkers is a particularly strong combination of combat, dread and atmosphere. Yet from the second act onwards it all felt unnecessarily padded, relying on repetitive shooting instead of the creepy atmosphere the series has been acclaimed for. Indeed, every time there was a large open space (usually pre-empted by convenient ammo boxes) or long corridors, you knew what was coming – the designers artificially lengthening the running time by repetitive violence and combat. Now, of course, those elements have always been integral to the *Dead Space* franchise, but combat is an excuse for some increasingly lazy level design in the second half of the game.

The redundancy of excessive combat is even more obvious in *Deadly Premonition* – a game with a genuinely unique character and narrative. A shame, then, that much of the game is spent in technically inept combat sequences. Don't even get me started on the boss fights! The director admits the painful combat was added at the last minute in order to appeal to a wider audience – perhaps suggesting that artistic integrity is far from the primary concern in game development.

They aren't alone – many games over the years have suffered by a perceived need to add combat elements. *Tomb Raider* is a series that has frequently struggled with implementing competent shooting. What's worrying in such cases is that designers seem either afraid or unable to make something that fully utilises the strengths of their game. *Dead Space* is about horror and atmosphere. *Deadly Premonition* is about quirky characters and story. *Tomb Raider* is about tomb raiding. Are gamers really so insistent that violence is vital to the experience, simply to beef up the running time?

> Are gamers really so insistent that violence is vital to the experience?

Well-implemented combat is only to be encouraged – *Vanquish* is a one-trick pony mechanically, and I wouldn't have it any other way. Yet when games that don't need to be bogged down by excessive player-controlled violence are adversely affected, perhaps there's something very wrong with gaming's obsession with guns. Is it the fault of lazy game designers, greedy publishers or an unreasonable audience? It's a mix of all three, and it's potentially holding games back from truly innovating.

In *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories*, I rejoiced when the game didn't ask me to shoot the first enemy, but rather to run. In a series that should be focusing on atmosphere and terror, that's more like it.
Stephen McNeice

Though we found *Deadly Premonition*'s (admittedly choppy) combat to be a welcome pace break from its sprawling dialogue, there's certainly plenty to be said for a less-is-more approach. The *Tomb Raider* article in **E**228 suggests that others agree. For gameplay without gunplay, you should be able to find plenty for your new 3DS. ■

FACEBOOK FEEDBACK

A selection of your responses to the topics we invite you to discuss at facebook.com/edgeonline

On Sony's decision to discontinue the PSP Go platform...
I hope that they've learnt that it doesn't matter how good an idea a hardware design is – if it's released at the wrong price point, no one will give a shit.
Peter Brozyna

On the value of offering game programming in the classroom...
I think learning the beginning of a basic scripting language like Perl which, let's face it, a ten-year-old could do, should become mandatory in IT classes. It's harder to learn computer languages the older you get, much like normal languages.
Samuel Marklew

Programming exploits so many key developmental areas that it should have been a staple part of the curriculum years ago.
Jonn Blanchard

On the potential of holographic 3D...
What is interesting about trying to project 3D images into space is that it totally changes the visual language on which we rely. Rather than traditional film techniques, which draw their language from classical art and photography, suddenly we will require a language derived more from sculpture: freestanding images and scenes which cannot rely on the scenery stretching to the horizon. Suddenly video-based media gets its own version of "theatre in the round".
Chris Jarvis



marshdavies.com



STEPHEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Videogaming's greatest questions: Who am I? What do I shoot? Why am I an American?

The topic of 'personal identity' in philosophy is a knotty one, as Julian Baggini's recent book, The Ego Trick, shows. What guarantees that you are the same person from one day to the next, or from one decade to the next? Some thinkers favour a story about psychological consistency, which others attempt to challenge with fantastical parables. Suppose that, through some magic sci-fi process, you suddenly underwent 'fission', so that there were now two identical human beings who shared all your thoughts and memories. Which one would be 'you'? Both? Neither?

One day, perhaps, the evolved progeny of videogames might play with the fluidity of time and character to furnish a kind of dynamic laboratory for such thought experiments. Currently, however – with marginal exceptions such as *Braid*, *Echochrome*, and perhaps *Chubby Drizzle* – they force us into a tiny set of roles that are crudely static and strangely vacant, as well as geosocially myopic.

Who was I, for instance, in the *Modern Warfare* games? I was a favoured clutch of guns. You will ask me in vain for the names of the variously accented and moustachio'd soldiers I inhabited, but I do recall vividly that I adored the M4A1 superior all-purpose face-shooting gadget (preferably with a grenade-launcher attachment), and as backup the warm close-quarters precision of an MP5, whereas my co-op friend is a high priest of the cult of the AK-47. In such games, the weapons have more character than the characters do. The fetishistically accurate looks and use-personality of an MP5 give it a far more robust and consistent 'personal identity' than is allowed to any of the grunts you temporarily control. (This is extended brilliantly in *Far Cry 2*, whose guns age and begin to creak, just like humans.)

The monstrously entertaining *Lost Planet 2*, though, offers an intriguing reversal of the norm: it is the weapons that are genericised and anonymous, known merely by the labels 'rifle', 'shotgun', and so forth. In each 'chapter' of the game, meanwhile, 'you' are a member of a different faction, all of whom appear to be at each others' throats until, at the finale, they all, rather touchingly, agree to cooperate in order to defeat an enormous glowing blob whose implacable blobular enormity threatens to plunge the planet into a new ice age, or something (I am paraphrasing slightly). The diversity of roles is only superficial, in that every character moves similarly, yet playing a set of kinetically inspired levels as a Sand Pirate did in some way teach me to love those foul-mouthed criminals.

> Aren't you tired of 'being' an American in games? Even if you *are* an American?

There is a way, too, in which videogames reveal something about the player's own 'personal identity', in that they are complex enough to sustain a style of play that remains recognisable as yours over time. In co-op shooters, my friend likes to storm around going all Rambo with his beloved Kalashnikov, while I hang back firing single shots, jonesing for that pink mist. It's a good tactical combination, and so over the years we have each made every disposable 'character' in all the shooters we have played as much like ourselves as possible. Videogame characters, after all, are inert until someone plays them. And when you play them, you change them, or at least you change what is, in a dynamic warlike context, essential to them: not their polygonal fizzogs or fatuous scripted clichés, but their behaviour. So any playable dude from *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (as I played it) has more in common with a dude from *Lost Planet 2* (as I played it) than he does with another dude in his own game (as someone else played it). In this way, 'personal identity' in videogames is really an emergent, intertextual phenomenon.

You can treat videogames in this way as devices for exploring (or at least revealing one aspect of) the player's own personhood, but could they also be devices for exploring the personhood of others? Could they one day be vehicles for enlarging our imaginative sympathies, as some people suppose novels are? Maybe, if they get a lot more sophisticated, and ditch the cultural imperialism for good measure. (Aren't you tired of 'being' an American in games? Even if you *are* an American? Even if you're in space? Why aren't there more iconic videogame protagonists who are German or Swedish, let alone Nigerian or Chilean?) Perhaps in 30 years most of the protagonists in games will be Chinese. But they will also still all be 'me'. That could work in a creatively uncanny sense (I experience the rich, persuasive simulation of another person as 'me') or it could just be business as usual (I happily shoot people in they face the way I always do, except 'I' am hoarsely yelling sweet nothings in Mandarin while I do it). Until then, beneath the sounds of chattering gunfire and excitably farting French horns, I will periodically hear Bob Dylan's quizzically hostile croak: 'Who are you, anyway?'

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



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LEIGH ALEXANDER

Level Head

Getting upset about the right things in the right way is the key to moving videogames forward

The work of Charles Dickens frequently illuminated society's dark side. In A Tale of Two Cities, he examined the French revolution – on its face a noble rebellion against a dispassionate, entitled ruling class – and portrayed in kind the ugliness of the bloodthirsty revolutionaries who manned the guillotines. Dickens wanted readers to understand the complexity of rebellion, and that even those who act for just causes can be capable of as much injustice as the institutions they protest.

Game developers and players could arguably be viewed as revolutionaries in their own right. The cultural mainstream affords little respect to interactive entertainment, leaving games the bastard stepchild to better-understood media such as film and television. The gaming pastime still carries a whiff of shame, even though gamers and developers alike have fought what feels like a long and thankless war for acknowledgment, for freedom from old misconceptions about excessive violence, social maladaptation or that old 'waste of time' chestnut. We've been activists in a campaign for appreciation, rallying round games-as-art discussions from the pages of professional publications to the more personal battlements of online forums and blog networks.

Or we reject the 'art' discussion entirely, militantly standing up for our right to explode heads and couple with onscreen aliens free from judgement. When we aren't declaring the noble artistry of gaming, we armour ourselves in the Just For Fun argument and punish the fearful and the alienated, exhausted of any implication that games somehow 'make us' violent, or make our kids violent, or that they ought to weigh topics of global crisis with any particular seriousness.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times – gamers might have suffered for years feeling like second-class citizens, but now they've grown extremely invested in ideas of what they are owed from both sides, highly precise about what they deserve, and vocal when they feel they are not receiving it.

Game developers and players could arguably be viewed as revolutionaries in their own right

You probably know how A Tale Of Two Cities ends up. Dickens' revolutionaries, who started out with "that glorious vision of doing good," eventually became "headlong, mad and dangerous." OK, OK, the comparison between gamers who may have become glutted on entitlement and the right to be unquestioningly justified and bloody revolutionaries whose spilt wine soon turned to spilt blood might be just a touch extreme, but since when do we turn down a chance to be dramatic?

I remember the first time I said the word 'microtransactions' to Blizzard. Activision had just merged with Vivendi, and everyone wondered if the infamous Bobby Kotick – every Dickensian parable needs an aristocratic fat cat, right? – was going to completely ruin *World Of Warcraft* with opportunistic business models. So when some of the company's leads invited me in to look at *Lich King* I asked about that. And here were these veteran designers who'd created one of the most widely loved and successful games ever, and my question had them looking scared.

They were scared because if they spoke one word crosswise, if they didn't phrase it exactly so and I happened to write it down, and gamers read it, there'd be a bloody howl welling up from the streets if gamers thought that *maybe* a different (and less-favourably viewed even when practical) business model might not be ruled out for *WOW* at any point in the future ever. Blizzard had given its players years of faithful service, and yet if it couldn't promise to keep away even a fringe shadow of this one explicit thing, those players would call for heads to roll.

A well-liked hitmaker like Valve isn't immune, either. The company's *Portal 2* ARG was lighthearted, drove engagement and benefited sales of indie games – an excellent service for a platform holder to offer its constituency. And people were happy to participate – electively, remember! – until all they tangibly got for their troubles was a few extra hours' jump on *Portal 2*'s release.

ARGs are fussy marketing campaigns. They aren't usually easy to like. But what was interesting about Potatogate was that the very players who were so excited to spend time eagerly poring over clues and details, to spend money on the indie titles involved, actually punished the launch they worked so hard to help advance. People liked the first *Portal* too much, and had become so excited for *Portal 2* that there was no way for them to be slaked. Implausibly, that was a bad thing.

And when one of those self-styled 'experts' goes on the evening news to blame games for murder sprees and sex crimes, it's more than fair for gamers to be affronted. But to respond with concussive waves of profane death threats? Is this an appropriate response on behalf of entertainment products?

It's fun to participate in a cultural revolution, but crazed entitlement shouldn't be a requirement. Let's everyone keep our heads on, shall we?

Leigh Alexander is a widely published writer on the business, design and culture of videogames and social media


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CLEMENT OHIO

You're Playing It Wrong

A revealing take on E3 from the other side of the corporate table, in a very special column

Greetings, what I believe you call tossers! The 2011 Electronic Entertainment Expo has arrived. If you're reading this, either you're not there in person, or you are, and someone's marketing department simply failed to scare up enough LED-studded modelflesh to distract you from a paper magazine. If they worked for me, I'd fire them and salt their lawns.

I am Clement Ohio, a venture capitalist moving into the gaming space. Dismiss this news at your peril: when I 'moved into' industrial diamonds, ensuing events culminated in a medium-scale air war between renegade arms dealers. I have my slacks tailored a bit tighter than you'd expect, well worth the pinching because it puts people on edge and I enjoy wielding a psychological advantage. I'm told I resemble a leaner Zeus.

Naturally, as head of a games company I looked into developing a presence at this year's E3, only to learn that participating as an executive would require me to charge across a stage like some circus ringmaster on a meth binge. The show floor is no better: a standard 'booth' resembles nothing so much as a large neon spider that's scuttled into the nearest Best Buy and bought all the plasma screens.

Still, this is **Edge**, and you've no doubt come expecting smart, insightful commentary to temper the geysering hyperbole from 24-year-old game journalists who'd hoped E3 would at least mean having sex with a semi-attractive PR rep. I'm not saying that describes all game journalists, just that it's the subtext of everything they write this time of year.

To be sure, my market research (a handy euphemism for 'corporate espionage') has revealed some intriguing E3 subplots: will Nintendo's hi-definition Wii successor alienate their newly acquired demographic of old people? Will Activision's preview of *Modern Warfare 3*, cementing *Call Of Duty*'s reputation as the franchise most resembling a family with six children ten months apart, a wife who's always pregnant, and a husband who's taken to calling the last trimester 'crunch'? Will Microsoft announce a console that blows the PS3's specs out of the water, or have we reached a physical limit on the number of credit card numbers that can be stolen?

Options ranged from an oiled-up 'booth dude' campaign, to staging an actual kidnapping

Had I chosen to join this cacophonous orgy, I will say that my operations department generated an impressive list of dynamic newsmaking stunts. Options ranged from a sure-to-be-controversial oiled-up 'booth dude' campaign, to staging an actual kidnapping of someone famous but not too famous, like Keita Takahashi. I'm sure he would have rolled with it.

E3 is trench warfare for your attention, and the show floor is about as much for your benefit as a maze is for rats. Whatever it is that you think you're enjoying, someone is put there to watch exactly what it would do to you, move by fevered move. So in lieu of muddying my loafers in this modern-day slave bazaar that could have been lifted directly from a Forgotten Realms novel, I decided to raise awareness of my brand simply by purchasing column space in the world's most respected gaming publication.

To what I assume you would consider their credit, **Edge** put up a decent fight. "We don't do that," they stammered, like a guppy in negotiations with a lantern fish. My initial offer was $3 million for the column, but in the end I spent $2 million strong-arming them into accepting $1 million for it.

Here's how, if you're curious. Six months ago, I subscribed to the magazine. Then I bought a list of 50,000 names, emails, and mailing addresses from a soon-to-be-defunct online soap retailer, and subscribed all of those people as well. For the record, there were 14 crossovers. As a courtesy, I extended their subscriptions by a year.

Armed with the names and addresses of more than half of the magazine's circulation, and leveraging my own standing as a subscriber, I initiated the kind of Byzantine, hideously punitive class-action lawsuit that's available only to very wealthy and unscrupulous people like myself. The kind of crippling, death-from-above legal action which, though meritless, still takes hundreds of thousands of dollars to dismiss, hundreds of thousands of dollars **Edge** didn't have, because they'd spent it ramping up their print infrastructure to accommodate 50,000 new subscribers. Game, set, and match. I even made them hail it as 'a very special column'.

I never intended to ruin **Edge**, of course; it's just the spiky part of my mating ritual. Or rather, I would have done it, but had the business sense to know I wouldn't need to. The magazine has just been redesigned, for heaven's sake, and to people of my stripe the word 'relaunch' translates pretty much exactly to 'blood in the water'.


By now you've probably realised I don't even have anything tangible to sell, just some pyrotechnic bullshit and gratuitous shows of wealth designed to ensure you remember my name. What do you know: perhaps I participated in E3 after all.

Clement Ohio writes at his pleasure, and tells us when we're allowed to print it. He has big houses in 15 countries


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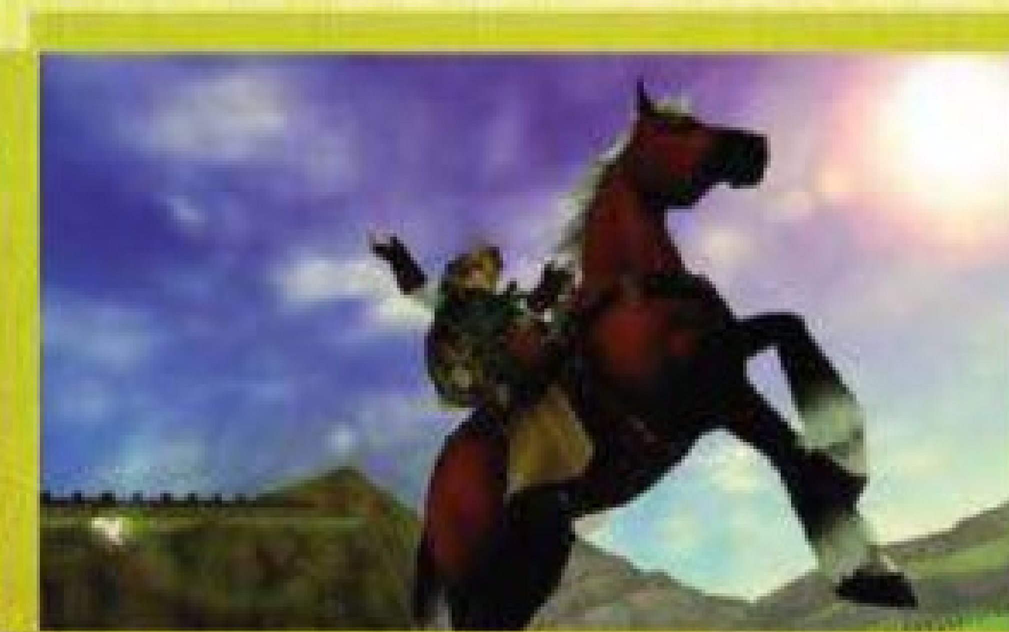


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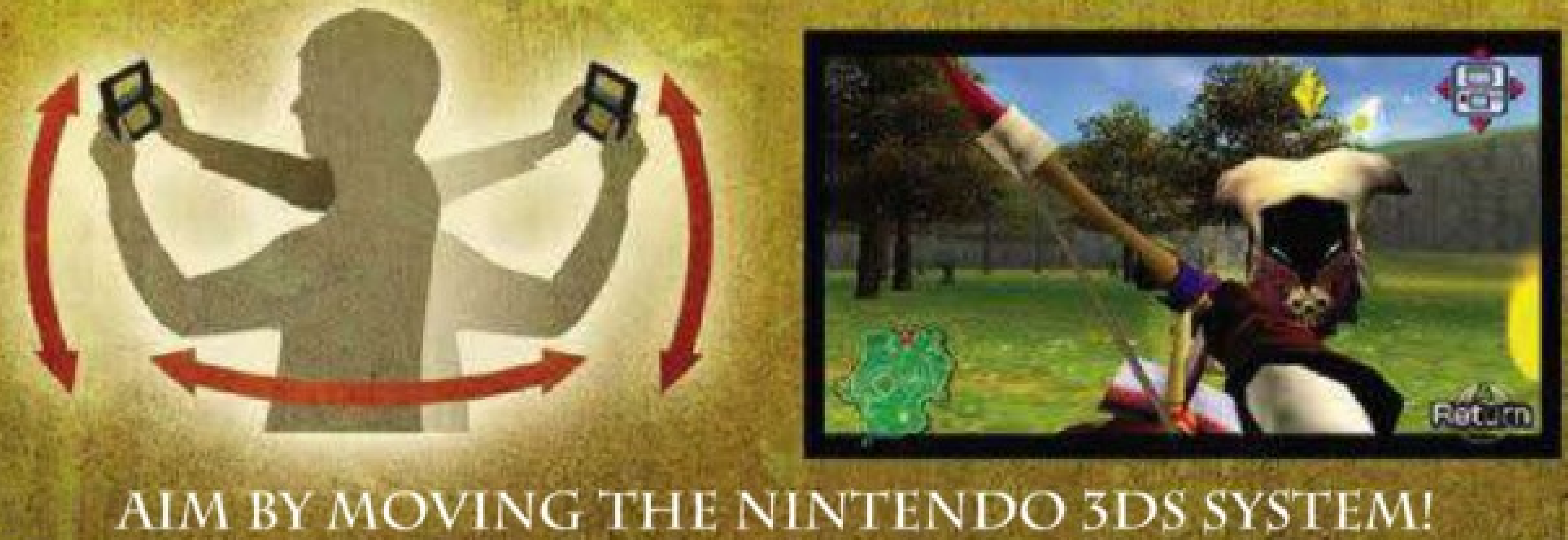




96% "pure undiluted genius" – GamesMaster, January, 1999

10/10 "Masterpiece" – IGN, November 25, 1998

100% "A game that can't be called anything other than flawless" – Gamespot, November 23, 1998



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#229

H Y P E

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

Science and fiction

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Up-to-the-minute previews and reviews

Within this issue's previews, the hard science fiction of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (p40) presents a striking contrast to the approach of *Starhawk* (p58). Where *Human Revolution* uses an extrapolation of the very real, and very current, science of enhancing the human body as the foundation for gameplay mechanics built around granular upgrades and piecemeal character progression, frequently pausing the action to ruminate on the ethics of such practices, *Starhawk* is happy to play fast and loose with the more nebulous concepts of off-world colonisation and interstellar warfare, all for the sake of setting up its epic, explosive battles. Both are in stark contrast to the expressionist mysticism of Eric Chahi's *From Dust* (p60), a game that draws on tribal iconography to depict a world grounded in the primitive and spiritual.

The mythology of each title is tied to its mechanics. The intricacy of *Deus Ex*'s upgrade system, which allows players to tweak and toy with their character's body, conveys the meddling nature of the transhuman science destabilising its world. Without the power *From Dust* grants players over its mutable landscape, its grand themes of godhood couldn't be conveyed. The key is in the balance, and symbiotic relationship, between gameplay and story.

Sci-fi and fantasy are fictions of ideas – and games allow players to experience these ideas firsthand. Admittedly, it's unlikely that science will have us growing death-dealing spikes from our limbs any time soon, but the ethical quandaries raised by *Deus Ex*'s in-game powers are genuine enough. And that's what makes its (in many ways clichéd) fiction so engaging. Allowing players to become augmented supermen might be a crude way of conveying the potential of transhuman technology, but in a world divided by the implications of such technology, and in a game design defined by choice, it gives its players the experience necessary to engage with the debate.

MOST WANTED

BioShock Infinite 360, PC, PS3
BioShock Infinite's thematic exploration of the blurry line at which patriotism turns into jingoism – or when legitimate national security concerns morph into xenophobia – promises to be both provocative and topical when it ships in 2012. After all, the US election process will have commenced in earnest, and there's sure to be flag-waving aplenty.

Okabu PS3
Proof that it's not all doom and gloom where PSN is concerned, HandCircus's co-op heroic-clouds-in-hats game makes the part of us that tingled at *The Wind Waker* sit up and take notice.

Anarchy Reigns 360, PS3
What's the point in mastering *Bayonetta* and *Vanquish*'s achingly stylish combat if there's no one around to see you've done it? We're still not entirely certain how Platinum's intricate and flowing combat systems will work online – but we're certain our victims will appreciate our immaculately constructed combos.

HYPE



DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION

God's out of the machine and the devil's in the details as Eidos invites us to 2027

Format	360, PC, PS3
Publisher	Square Enix
Developer	Eidos Montreal
Origin	Canada
Release	August



H*uman Revolution*'s age of reason is a troubling time to explore. The people wandering the streets of this futuristic Detroit are a spindly, ill-proportioned bunch, thin frames accentuated by neo-Jacobean jerkins and ruffs, while the mega-corp skyline is stained a sickly sodium yellow, as if the whole world is perched at the dawn of a new and toxic era. *Deus Ex*'s distinct vision of tomorrow might be starting to seem quietly unconvincing – although cyborg ethics are slowly creeping into medical discourse, bail-outs have left the series' sleek corporate wonderland looking a little too plush – but the team at Eidos Montreal has still had a decent run at building the year 2027, crafting dense geopolitical networks where moral compasses spin wildly, staffing a rich selection of biotech firms, terrorist groups and government agencies, and indulging in plenty of ebook philosophising along the way.

Judging by the first 15 hours of the game, the team's world-building is at its most convincing on a local scale. This time around, you've been cast as Adam Jensen, the security chief for the presumably untrustworthy tech company Sarif Industries, and it's a fusty pleasure to poke around in the corporation's shiny Plexiglas offices and have your worst fears confirmed. On the brink of a major breakthrough, Sarif is a leading player in the field of human augmentation, the game's primary thematic hangnail, and in these kinds of confined quarters the developer can be king of the details. Ebooks are scattered around almost every cubicle, keeping you up to speed on the geopolitical preoccupations of the late 2020s, and exceedingly thorough players will relish the chance to bounce from one terminal to the next, each computer clogged with chains of convincingly workish emails: bitchy, paranoid and elegantly riddled with typos and incriminating admissions.

After a combat tutorial and a little cutscene violence leaves Jensen crippled and then heavily augmented, the game eventually flings open the doors of Detroit itself, allowing you to tackle quests and subquests at your own pace. It's a pleasant surprise to find that *Human Revolution*'s first true hub is a city rather than an office block, but with this wider scale comes a nagging sense that the dev team may have overreached. Motor City's an ambitiously sprawling muddle of streets, but it retains the hollow sound-stage feel of *Invisible War*'s urban spaces, even if the



The guns look the part, but *Human Revolution* will punish you for using standard firstperson shooter tactics. Ammo is scarce, enemy aim tends to be sharp, and bullets will incapacitate you even as they cut down your health

HYPE

DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION



BELOW **Boss encounter or pressurised negotiation? It's your choice, and one that sees *Deus Ex*'s conversation system at its most nimble. Talking down a well-armed NPC takes a keen eye for the subtle nuances of the occasionally clunky dialogue**

After a few missions you'll know Sarif Industries' offices right down to the air vents. Talking to other members of staff – and holding a few at gunpoint – is still a good way to delve deeper, however





fondness for Holiday Inn-style carpeting has been ditched. The frail NPCs that spout fretful insights on every intersection seem not just biomechanically enhanced but stuffed with theme-park animatronics, and while the game's central augmentation debate filters cleverly through every stratum of society, moving from boardrooms to baseball punditry and the lewd chatter of prostitutes, *Deus Ex*'s cast is more convincingly human when they're emailing each other about their doubts and prejudices than when addressing you directly.

It may seem unfair to complain about unsatisfying trivialities like this (or the aggressive asset reuse) when Eidos has rendered an entire city centre and strung a wealth of optional missions through its sewers and apartment buildings. But these things matter in a game that has such an obvious ambition to communicate through its environment. Cut corners make the world look flimsy, and calcified dialogue leaves the fiction seeming Auto-Tuned. That said, it's worth remembering that portentous hamminess is as much a part of this series as inventory *Tetris* and non-lethal combat. You might wish that the growling, pensive Jensen was a more appealing protagonist – in a world of scientists and philosophers, you're left playing the heavy – but take comfort in the fact that *Deus Ex*'s plastic soul has at least survived the transition between studios.

Eidos Montreal is sharp and capable where it really counts, offering up a range of grey-area objectives that force you to engage with both the tricksy potential of your augmented superpowers and the game's nuanced AI. From combat tutorial through a slew of tense encounters and right into a scene-shifting boss battle in a heavily fortified FEMA installation, the Detroit of *Human Revolution*'s first act presents a tight riddle of story missions and side-quests that might take anything from five to 15 hours to work through – although if you clear it in under ten, the chances are that *Deus Ex* isn't the right game for you.

The opening section, which sees Jensen attempting to defend a Sarif scientist from augmented assassins, may not show Eidos' game at its cruel and inventive best – as ever, although *Deus Ex* looks like a shooter it should never have to be played as one – but it provides an excellent introduction to the strategic ripples made by the new cover system. As Sam Fisher discovered, point-to-point hide-and-seek can mesh well with the muscular agenda of a contemporary stealth game, turning each room into a puzzle as you pick your way past guards and around the

BELOW The game's slightly awkward animation tends to develop a little more life whenever you cash in an augment. One-hit kills are brutal without being *too* gory, and they make for an excellent change of pace if you're stealthing your way through a mission



Portrait of the sleep-deprived

The *Deus Ex* series has hardly been keeping its fondness for Blade Runner a secret all these years, but *Human Revolution* ramps up the levels of homage considerably. Visitors to Detroit's central police station may catch an announcement paging a very familiar officer, yet it's Jensen's apartment that sees the cineastes at Eidos Montreal really earning their money, aping the lighting, furniture and ambience of Deckard's digs. Beyond the in-jokes, however, it's still an interesting space, and players can hunt for a hidden safe stashed with ammo and credits, before investigating a mystery surrounding a broken bathroom mirror.





LEFT The architecture of 2027 reflects everything from neo-classical trends to a nice bit of '80s brutalism. Patterns of light and dark quietly shift your attention from one spot to the next in a world which otherwise might seem overwhelmingly cluttered. Besides that, Eidos Montreal's greatest trick is to know when to rein it in

roving lenses of security systems. Compared to the lithe options of *Splinter Cell: Conviction*, however, prepare for something much more basic: Jensen is able only to roll between cover on the left or right and sneak around corners. Limited as they may seem, these no-frills options are the perfect fit for a game that wants you to slowly inch through its levels. They work well with the new rechargeable health system, too, which encourages you to test out a broad range of approaches, while ensuring that bad decisions will never condemn you to a slow death in an elevator shaft as soldiers shoot at your ankles.

Once you're choosing between augments, however, *Human Revolution*'s encounters get a lot more interesting – unsurprisingly, really, as the game's narrative is so noisily fixated with exploring the morality of these power-ups. XP earns Praxis Points which can then be spent on purchasing or upgrading new augmentations for various parts of your body, and it's here, just when combat starts to come together, that the game is at its most excitingly contradictory. You can punch through walls, turn invisible, transform robotic arms into skewers or mutate yourself into a spinning cluster bomb, but the game's modular power system ensures that you'll never be able to do these things too often. Equally, you can choose to pour points into upgrading the number of augment-fuelling energy cells with which you head into battle, but only the first will recharge over time – and slowly, at that. In the current build, offensive augments like melee attacks can feel separated from the moment-to-moment action, as they erupt in the form of tiny cutscenes. Even if they're more slickly incorporated into the final game, however, the rationing of abilities is already perfectly judged. Players must be inventive

You can punch through walls, turn invisible or mutate into a spinning cluster bomb



HYPE

DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION

Jensen's rather dull, but as a main character, perhaps he should be. He's at least surprisingly capable for the fall-guy role in a moody neo-noir storyline



with both movement and violence, and even the most standard area attack feels like a major event when you finally let rip.

Weapons can be modified almost as thoroughly as your own body, but they too remain intentionally hobbled: slow to draw and nearly impossible to keep stocked with ammunition. For newcomers, this may all sound counter-intuitive, but the more you play, the more you'll realise that *Deus Ex*'s war-rations approach to combat gives the

Human Revolution's AI will bear a grudge if you give it the opportunity

game's action a striking sense of focus. Forever pitched between panic and failure, you learn to improvise with your brilliant – and brilliantly compromised – suite of tools, toying with AI in the open, picking off stragglers after luring them away from groups, eavesdropping on plans and hacking – instead of blasting – your way through buildings.

So while the game's structure switches between main campaign objectives casting you as a feared corporate enforcer and sidequests that have a habit of undermining those victories, *Human Revolution*'s best moments so far aren't found in the character reveals or plot twists, but in the different approaches you can bring to each encounter. They're found in the tactical repercussions these choices cause, too. Sent to examine a body in a police morgue, for example, you can try to charm your way in or sneak around the back, taking the risk that you'll be caught and will have to start shooting. As you weigh up that decision, though, you're not just juggling your current augments and ammo, but pondering whether you're likely to need to return to the police station at some point in the future. *Human Revolution*'s AI won't just alter patrol routes and provide enemy squads with hierarchies for you to disrupt; it will bear a grudge if you give it the opportunity.

Beyond the new tricks and the potential disappointments, it's exciting to see that Eidos Montreal has decided *Human Revolution* should celebrate its genetic inheritance as a game aimed at the inventively, even patiently, cruel. Its ideal player will enjoy lurking behind a bench to spot gaps in patrols, and respond with schemes rather than frustrations when faced with enemy AI that's capable of tracking targets to an air vent, but is unable to step inside. It's still a world built from subterfuge and conspiracy, and the biggest secret remains a strange one: despite the boundless promise of its augmented superpowers, *Deus Ex* is at its best when it's forcing you to manage weaknesses rather than strengths. ■

Q&A Jonathan Jacques-Belletête

Art director, Human Revolution



When you're asked to design the future, how does that process begin?
As soon as we settled on making *Human Revolution* a prequel, what became very important was the idea of the near future. That's a big part of cyberpunk. We read a lot about the technology curve, seeing where tech is going for the next 40 years or so, and we then compressed all of that into the game. We met with trans-human specialists, and we read a lot about DARPA, too, as that's generally the spear-tip for technology like augmentations.

Was credibility your key concern?
Well, at the same time, you want to have fun designing these products, right? We also wanted to give players a few awe-inspiring moments. So there are moments when you push it a little bit: I don't think we'll have two-tier cities spread over different floors in 2027, but it works for the game. Reading about all this, though, I think for a lot of the stuff in the game, we'll be surprised when we get to 2027 how weird the real world has become.

***Human Revolution* leaves us with the impression that we only see a tiny portion of the things you've come up with. How do you choose which of these sorts of details end up in the game?**
That's right. It's a natural selection that happens as you go along. I don't think that anything we came up with was superfluous, because everything adds a little more credibility to the game, but there were certainly things that ended up eliminating themselves due to time constraints.

How do you balance what the audience is asking for with ensuring that the game doesn't feel like it's been built by committee?
It's quite hard, honestly. The way I see it is that we have confidence in what we're making. We were confident that once we had the proper *Deus Ex* recipe, we knew the fans would be satisfied. That's obviously not a way of dealing with fans, though. The problem is that, when you have a game that takes four years to develop, it's very hard to plan the way you release information. If you listen to our audience, they wish we'd given them everything from the first day of the project, and that's just not possible. When the audience raises things you should definitely sort out – like making the highlighting optional – that's when you just have to get on top of it and do it. But it's been interesting: we definitely feel like we've had someone behind our shoulder the whole time.









RIGHT ***Human Revolution*'s cars capture the simplicity of Blade Runner's, along with, perhaps, a little of their flimsiness. The game's much more at home with airborne vehicles, even if it does tend to save them for cutscenes and end-of-level exit points**



ABOVE **As befitting a game set in the near-future, weaponry is, for the most part, both ballistic and recognisable. Turret-disabling energy weapons and tranquiliser guns will assist those who don't wish to kill, while mods allow you to augment your guns**

RIGHT **The designer of Jensen's glasses is clearly a fan of Capcom's *P.N.03*, and the similarity continues with a neat foldaway animation. The slow creep of Jensen's augmentations is handled with a squeamish subtlety, and NPCs are always eager to chat about his cybernetics**

Design showcase

Human Revolution's art style is both ambitious and focused, defibrillating ancient cyberpunk ideas with short, sharp bolts of Renaissance style.







LEFT, RIGHT & BELOW **The characters tend towards the gaunt, and this is particularly true of the women, who can look as if they were built without quite enough skin. Neo-Renaissance styles, such as a jacket's shoulders and pleats, render the game unmistakable, while hinting at 2027's social upheavals. The wedges of the hair-band are part of a theme that both suggests the hubs and spokes of a network and the threads of broken glass**



RESISTANCE 3

Insomniac's shooter series has a bleak new outlook. But will it prove futile?

Format PS3
Publisher SCE
Developer Insomniac Games
Origin US
Release October



"So many things make firing a gun feel good." *Resistance 3*'s lead designer **Drew Murray** is delivering a quickfire crash course in weapon aesthetics, and he's barely pausing for breath. "It's the animation of the gun. So much of it comes down to sound – there are so many times we're like, 'This gun is *OK*,' and the audio guys will get ahold of it and it totally changes the experience. A lot of it is seeing the impact on enemies, whether that's just their generic 'get hit' animation, or if you can do something special where a gun has a unique effect."

Clearly Murray, along with his colleagues at Insomniac, has given guns plenty of thought. The studio's long-running *Ratchet & Clank* series is famed for its all-singing, all-dancing arsenal, and the most immediately noticeable change in the third instalment of its nightmarish 20th-century rewrite, *Resistance*, is the game's overhauled weapons system. This redesign covers all the points on which Murray has touched.

Each gun features updated aim and fire animations, from the stockier-than-ever Rossmore shotgun to the new, instectoid eyeline sights of the Chimeran Auger. The sound effects for each weapon are also new, and each has fresh ways of tearing the waves of Chimeran foot soldiers to pieces thanks to *Resistance 3*'s upgrade system. The Magnum's ➲



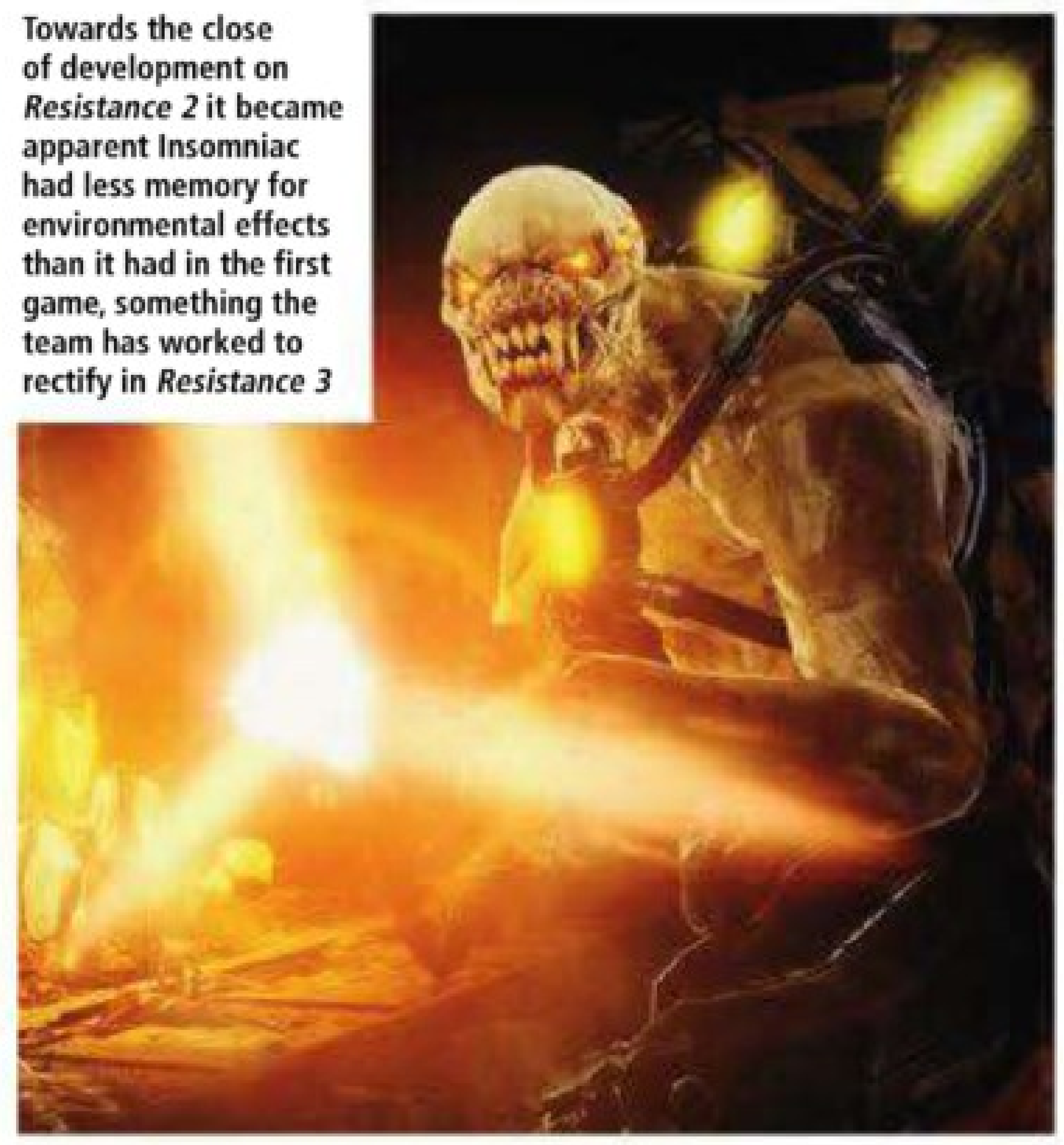
What big teeth you have. *Resistance 3*'s new hero Joseph Capelli stares at a Chimeran Goliath. Capelli is travelling across an occupied US from Oklahoma to New York to have one last go at saving the world



The Chimeran hybrids continue to mutate and diversify, giving the player plenty of new meat to shoot at. This brutish lump is called a Brawler, presumably because of its physical strength, though it carries guns on each wrist, too



BELOW **A cold blue forest in Pennsylvania signals a change in pace and tone for the series. Gone is the military bluster that came with Nathan Hale's special forces team, replaced by a foggy atmosphere of dread**



Towards the close of development on *Resistance 2* it became apparent Insomniac had less memory for environmental effects than it had in the first game, something the team has worked to rectify in *Resistance 3*

detonating rounds – a returning favourite from *Resistance 2* – become a deadly cluster of clattering squibs, while the Rossmore boasts a powerful incendiary blast that reduces hybrid enemies to writhing piles of flames.

This we're able to test extensively during the much-trailered boat ride down a foggy Mississippi river, with Chimeran foot soldiers leaping on deck from obscured riverbanks to be obliterated, in turn, by our chugging boomstick. The effect is loud and impactful, but aside from the extra firepower the game itself feels much the same, with smooth shooting and a slight clumsiness when it comes to interacting with the world, the sluggish butting against an onboard ammo box feeling avoidably cumbersome.

Less clumsy, though, is the weapon select system, which reverts to the first game's pop-up wheel following the second's dalliance with a two-gun mechanic. Murray links this to Insomniac coming to terms with its identity as a studio. "At the beginning of *Resistance 3* we were talking about the franchise as a whole," he explains. "We're more comfortable – it's OK if we're not doing what everyone else is doing. We don't need a two-weapon system or regenerative health like most shooters. We can make *Resistance* its own shooter."

"We don't need a two-weapon system. We can make this its own shooter"

Murray talks about the freedom the wheel brings, the "more open level design" enabled by handing the player access to a spread of offensive options, and a new mission set in a frosty Pennsylvanian forest shows this open approach at work. The setting is a refreshing change from the series' regular diet of swampy browns, with stark, leafless branches stretching into a dark blue night sky. Cloaked Chimeran snipers fill the level, taken out with a Magnum and a shotgun during close encounters and with the Marksman and heat-sensing Auger from range. It's not the tactical manoeuvring that engages – in truth, a tightly controlled combat situation is more likely to be strategically satisfying – but the baser pleasure of gorging on the variety of firepower. In a market filled with stripped-down, realistic shooters, this cacophonous feast is *Resistance*'s unique strength, and it's encouraging to see Insomniac come to terms with this.



New world order

Having almost completed their takeover of Earth, the Chimera are diversifying. New sniper hybrids are able to cloak themselves and become near-invisible, while a taller, thinner breed called Long Legs come equipped with short-burst jetpacks. Perhaps the trickiest introduction isn't a new strain of Chimera, though, but a new Chimeran toy – the shield drone. These hover behind enemy footsoldiers casting an impenetrable bubble around their companion, and must be taken down before damage can be done to the Chimera itself.



A thirdperson view of the freshly redesigned Rossmore shotgun and its new, upgradable concussive fire mode. Judging by the spread of insides on the floor, it packs a heck of a kick

The shifting direction of *Resistance 3*'s story also puts distance between the series and its modern combat competitors. Writer **Jon Paquette** describes *Resistance 2* as a "military-based, balls-out action shooter," and he should know, having played the game while he was working on EA's *Medal Of Honor* series. But with the death of hero Nathan Hale ("A *huge* risk," admits Murray), *Resistance 3* now stars Hale's colleague-turned-killer Joseph Capelli, fighting for his family. "We've done our best to humanise it," Paquette says. "We get to visit different pockets of humanity on the way from Oklahoma to New York, to see how they're dealing with [the invasion]. It's not like in *Resistance 1* and *2*, just being part of the military, constantly getting beat down. It's these people who are surviving any way they can. They are trying to live life."

Four years have passed since the events of *Resistance 2*, including Hale's death, and the Earth is almost entirely occupied by the Chimera. Capelli leaves his wife and children to aid the returning Dr Malikov in a final attempt to repel the invasion, an act of last-ditch desperation that recalls the John Wyndham parallels so apparent in the British-set *Resistance 1*. The key characteristics of Wyndham's various apocalypses is that they don't end well, something they have in common with the *Resistance* games so far, which have featured the loss of Europe, then the United States, along with our hero. "That is a worry," admits Paquette. "This story is kind of depressing when you look at it." Murray offers a more upbeat promise. "I think *Resistance 3* ends on more of an up note than *Resistance 2* did," he laughs. "Definitely." ■



bit.ly/j0AFp3
Screenshot gallery

BODYCOUNT

Codemasters' new FPS has the ultimate gimmick: simplicity

Format	360, PS3
Publisher	Codemasters
Developer	Codemasters Guildford
Origin	UK
Release	2011



Stare too long at the singleplayer shooter, and you'll see a genre in schism. Over with the *Call Of Duty* crowd, super-budget stage management is turning story mode into a sequence of magic lantern slides: spawn patterns are arranged for the perfect tableau, while precision-placed mortar strikes lead your eye from one set-piece to the next. At the other extreme, meanwhile, the likes of *Bulletstorm* and *Borderlands* have made the leap into desperate invention, losing themselves in the same clouds of combo systems and power-ups that have recently choked racing games. It's this divided landscape that makes *Bodycount* seem both bold and inevitable. Codemasters is building a shooter whose central selling point is that it will make you feel spectacularly good to just shoot things.

It has its baroque elements too, of course: downed enemies drop intel orbs that fuel the likes of air strikes, explosive rounds, and invincibility, while a familiar skill kill system encourages you to shoot with style to keep your combo growing. These mechanics may not make much of an impact until you're on your second playthrough, however. *Bodycount*'s framework for inventive murder is less indulgent and all-consuming than *Bulletstorm*'s, and it's swept away, for your

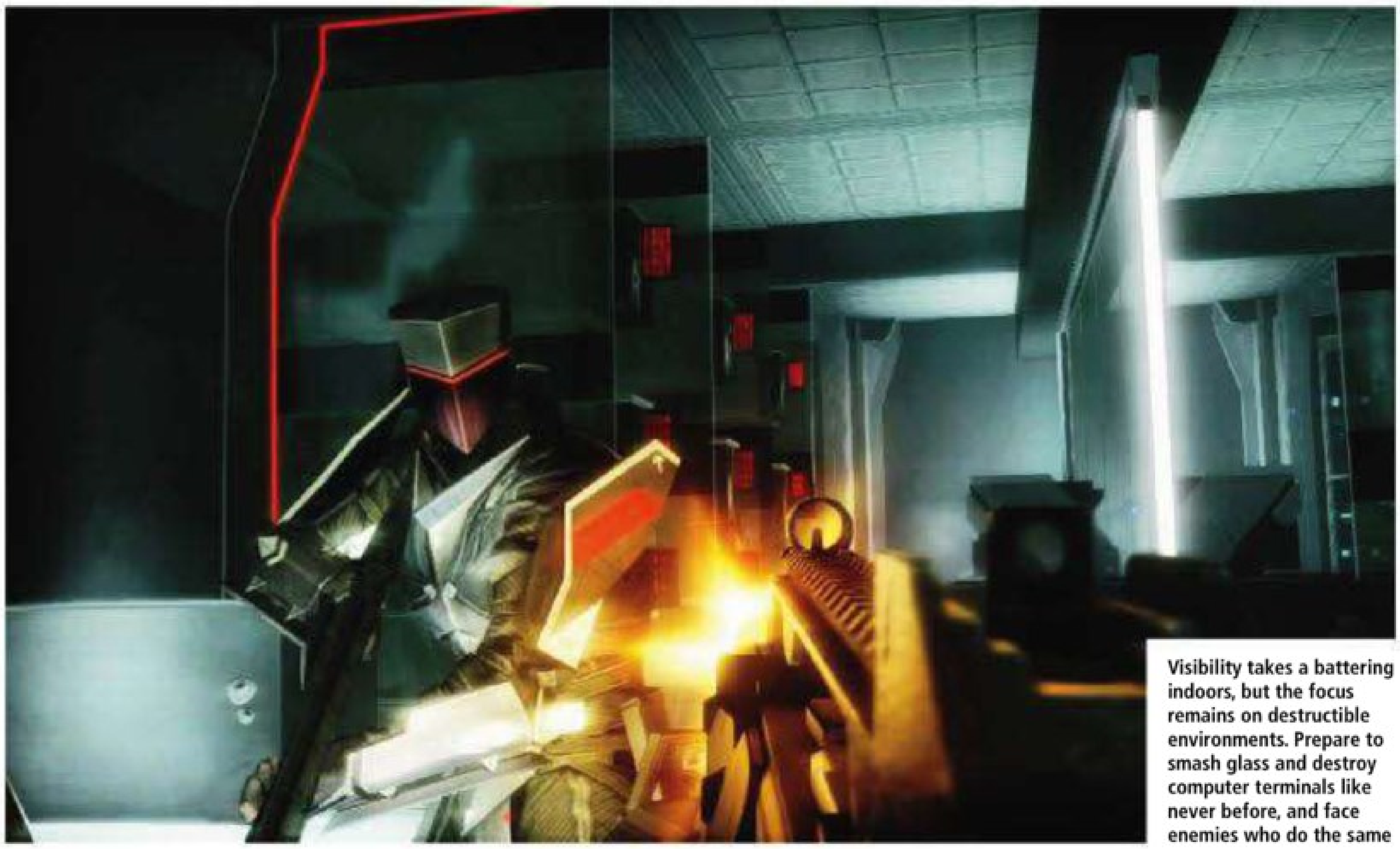
RIGHT **Target's angular design should mark them out from most videogame enemies. These elite killers will be smarter and more deadly than most of the game's cannon fodder**



bit.ly/lvzEHF
Dev team interview



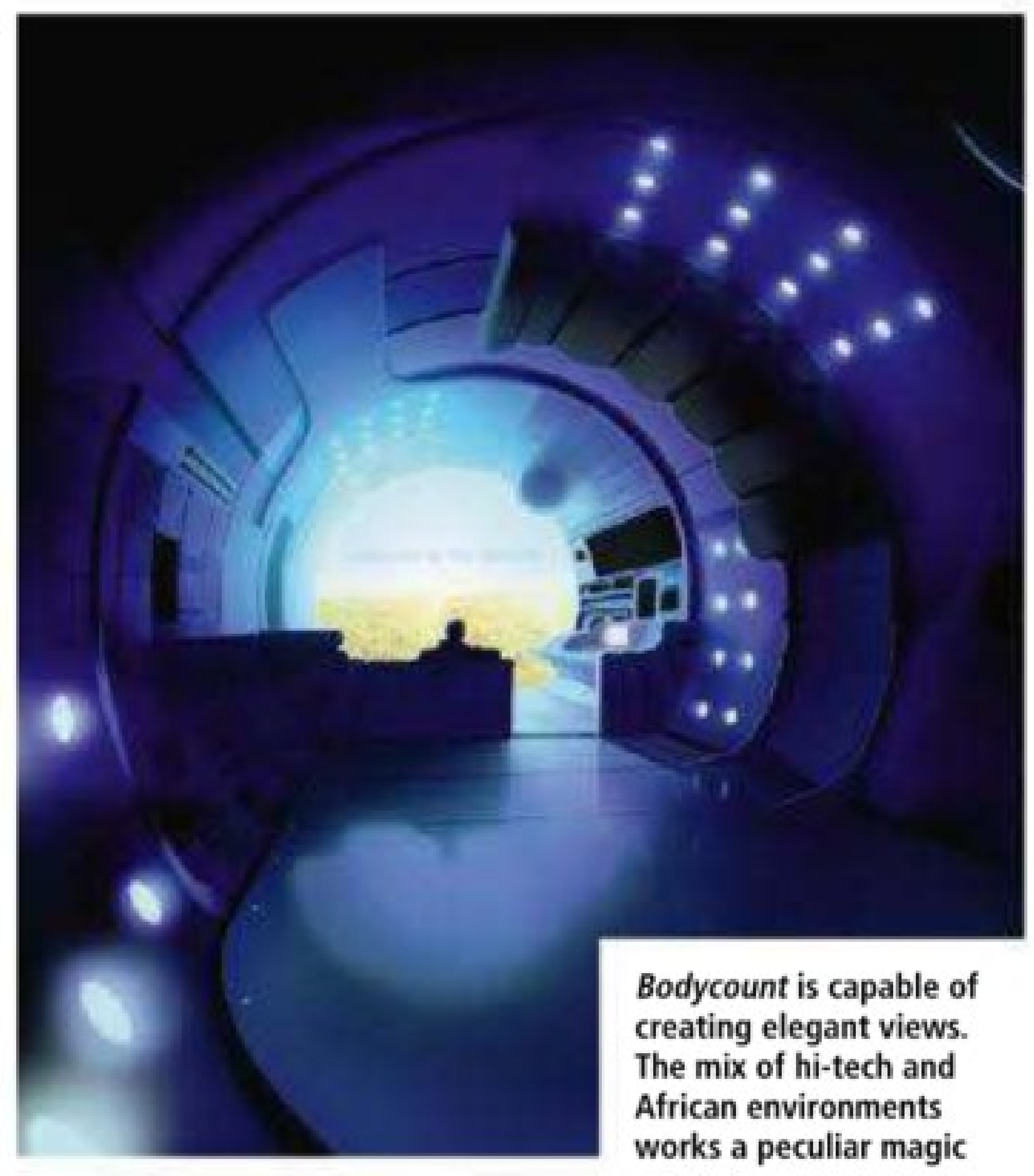
The guns are the real stars, and their look and feel has been exaggerated. It makes for a spectacularly exciting arsenal of weapons – and, presumably, some nasty headaches for whoever has to do all the game balancing



Visibility takes a battering indoors, but the focus remains on destructible environments. Prepare to smash glass and destroy computer terminals like never before, and face enemies who do the same



Shreddable terrain means that close-quarters fighting might not be close-quarters for very long. Walls can be brought down and cover can be chewed up, giving the action room to breathe



Bodycount is capable of creating elegant views. The mix of hi-tech and African environments works a peculiar magic

first encounter at least, by the darkly primal delights that erupt with each simple squeeze of the trigger.

You don't need too many other incentives to enter the fray when even the standard assault rifle lets off a pounding metallic rhythm as you control a tight, lively spray of bullets, or when the lowliest of the entry-level weapons is more than capable of chipping through the game's shreddable wood and masonry in seconds. Gun porn, a term minted for the game's spiritual forefather *Black*, doesn't quite capture the tactile excess of what Codemasters has made: *Bodycount*'s weaponry feels shockingly powerful.

Cold steel may provide the unmistakable signature, but this is a very different game depending on whether you're blasting things indoors or out. Beneath the blue skies of Pirate Bay, a West African junker port where you're dispatched by the heroic Network organisation, you'll find yourself in an airy world of colour and light. At times like this, *Bodycount* looks like Sonic's Green Hill Zone after the ravages of a cartoon hurricane: luminous patches of grass and golden rock poke out between chunks of rusting metalwork, and the sun glances madly from the sharp edges of freight containers.

At times, Bodycount looks like Sonic's Green Hill Zone after the ravages of a hurricane

If you're used to the tight channelling of other mainstream shooters, prepare for the unexpected: *Bodycount*'s singleplayer maps feel like the kind of thing *COD* would opt for only in its rangier deathmatch arenas. Pirate Bay is a large, open space built around a sunken dry dock, and the level designers have been both bold and pleasantly shameless in the swiftness with which your mission's objectives will send you back and forth several times across this single environment. It should be a recipe for boredom, but such blatant doubling-up works because there's no best route from one waypoint to the next – and because the landscape's always changing.

The ability to shred cover – and by cover, we mean practically every structure – means that *Bodycount*'s levels unfold steadily. Arenas appear as low walls come down, while even labyrinthine internal spaces can transform into kill-rooms. It's much too dynamic a world for simple line-of-sight to rule the day, so instead the game's more concerned with having its players manage range.



The standard assault rifle is a lot more entertaining than it should be. Like all of *Bodycount*'s weapons it has a real sense of weight, and muzzle flash so elaborately over-the-top it's astonishing that the barrels don't melt

This is a shooter in which you need the right tools for the right distance, in other words, and it's a pleasure to experiment with a brisk melee knife lunge, a shotgun that handles like a devilish hole-punch, and an assault rifle filled with tooth-rattling character. You can rearrange your two-slot loadout at regular weapon caches, and you're also given grenades as a fallback (you can set them to explode on impact or opt for a timer)

It's a pleasure to experiment with a knife, a shotgun and a tooth-rattling assault rifle

alongside a cover system, which doesn't work the way you expect. You can't stick to scenery because the scenery itself might not be sticking around very long. Instead, a full squeeze of the left trigger locks you to the ground and pulls up iron sights, letting you use the sticks to lean as well as aim, while a half-press allows you to strafe.

The final twist at Pirate Bay is that you're not up against a single foe, but two different factions, a scrappy militia and a more organised army, and their AI is sufficiently aggressive to ensure that they're more than happy to fight among themselves, taking much of the level geometry with them. *Bodycount*'s been keeping the real enemy on ice, however, and the shift to an interior map reveals that they come in the form of Target, a powerful global organisation with a charismatic visual design, roping together elements from stealth bombers, medieval crusaders and Grace Jones album covers.

Indoors, and up against much tougher opponents, *Bodycount* has a completely different pace. Here, inside the glossy smoked-glass halls of Target's underground facilities, you're likely to find yourself fighting for position in split-level atriums, while enemies rush you from all sides. Target has better armour and sharper tactics than the rest of the game's enemies, and in levels that tend to be constructed from disorienting chunks of pitch-black metal interspersed with walls of blinding light they make for a terrifying foe. If it's the simple grunt of the weaponry and the ragdoll hit responses that make *Bodycount* feel like *Black*, its aggressive, class-based AI (alongside foot soldiers you can expect suicide bombers, medics and even scavengers, racing across the battlefield harvesting intel) brings to mind the twitching horrors of *Geometry Wars* or even *Robotron*.

With Target in place, *Bodycount*'s looking ambitiously simple: a substantial arcadey blaster with reserves of secret cleverness. As games employ increasingly complex theatre in order to ensure players feel that the world is aware of them, it's quietly astonishing to consider how much Codemasters has done to make your presence inescapably obvious – and with little more than exaggeration, focus, and several million bullets.



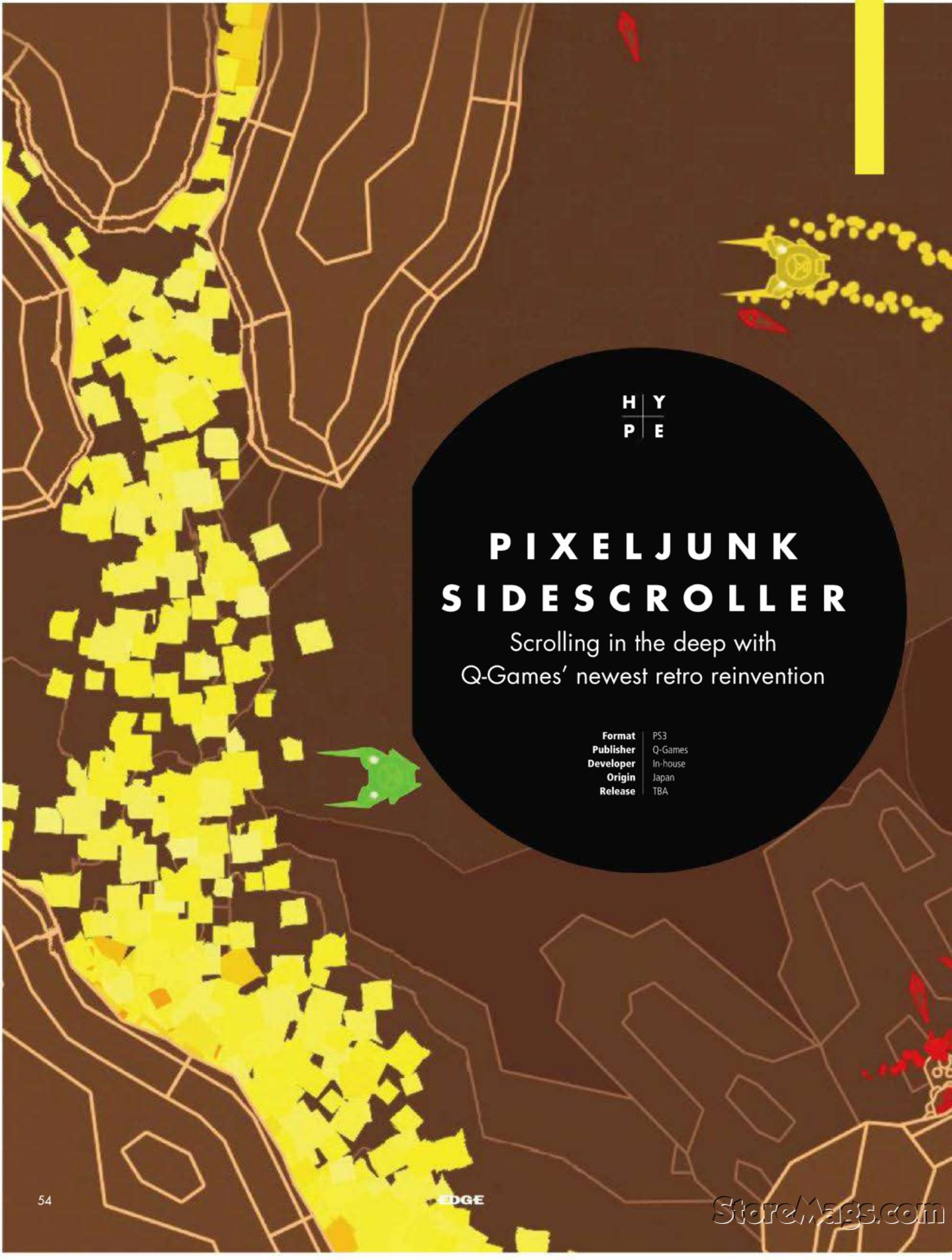
When you're outdoors, *Bodycount* relies on bold colours a lot more than its grimy contemporaries. Even a dry dock used by pirates seems to have been built from sunshine, lollipops and rainbows



Intel inside

The intel orbs that rain from the bodies of your enemies have the makings of classic collectibles. They allow you to restock ammo while also charging your super moves, but they're also colour-coded, as enemies release yellow orbs if you offed them in a stylish or efficient manner, and blue if you whittled them away with little flair. A visual heat map of your abilities, their final trick lies with their audio design. The weapons provide the bassline, the trebly tinkling of the orbs brings the peculiar, shifting melodies, and *Bodycount* becomes an elaborate music sequencer as you wade through its ever-changing battlefields.


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PIXELJUNK SIDESCROLLER

Scrolling in the deep with Q-Games' newest retro reinvention

Format	PS3
Publisher	Q-Games
Developer	In-house
Origin	Japan
Release	TBA



HYPE

PIXELJUNK SIDESCROLLER

These images of the pre-alpha version show streams of tumbling cubes in place of *Shooter*'s trademark magma and water – this isn't a new artistic statement, just placeholder graphics. Already, though, *Sidescroller* stamps its own aesthetic identity on a genre long dominated by neon and glimmering metal



The *PixelJunk* series is nothing if not varied. Over three years, we've seen distinctive, aesthetically unique takes on racing, tower defence and co-operative platforming, often developed in collaboration with talented artists local to Kyoto who have contributed bespoke sound and artwork.

If they even have a unifying principle, aside from their self-imposed restriction to two dimensions, it's a creative retro sensibility, an instinct for how to repackage classic game concepts in novel and endearingly simple new forms. But they're not games suited to repeat performances, which perhaps explains why the *PixelJunk* series has pinged off in a completely new direction with every new game. *Shooter*, with its gradual exploration and plentiful hidden trinkets, was the first *PixelJunk* concept able to sustain two full games.

In fact, it's now spawned a third in *PixelJunk Sidescroller*, a side-scrolling shooter that retains *Shooter*'s basic elements, but not its form. The puzzle-exploration structure is gone, replaced by colourful and deadly obstacle courses of nimble, darting enemies, criss-crossing lasers, streams of bullets, magma and dangerous machinery. In pace and basic gameplay it's closest to *R-Type*, but like any Q-Games project, it has a very strong stylistic identity.

The adventurous colour palette and crisp, clean 2D aesthetic mean that *Sidescroller* immediately looks completely different from anything else in its genre, even though it's currently missing the liquid physics that were *Shooter*'s hallmark. The very early code shown on these pages still includes plenty of placeholder graphics and enemy designs, but the stylistic direction already comes across clearly.

Sidescroller retains the ship from *Shooter*, as well as some of its gameplay quirks – such as dunking yourself into water to recover health. The ship has three weapons – a laser, homing missiles and straightforward bullets – but it no longer rotates, shooting from left to right as the screen scrolls inexorably towards ever more devious deathtraps. It's not a bullet-hell shooter, but it certainly is challenging, especially at this pre-alpha stage – even this early, though, it's clear that *Sidescroller* has enough of a one-more-go factor to push you through to success.

The crisp 2D aesthetic means that this looks different from anything else in its genre

The weapons level up independently when you fly over a pickup, and different obstacles require different tactics. Missiles are best suited to stationary magma- or laser-spewing enemies, while the rapid-fire bullets make shorter work of the quirkily designed weaker ships that stream out from the right of the screen in eye-pleasing patterns. But the environment, too, is an enemy, throwing traps and obstacles into your path with cheekily malicious regularity. The ship can still shoot through soft rock to create a path for itself, but only the patient and skilled can successfully negotiate the pneumatic machinery that threatens to suddenly crush it into a dinner plate. Because the movement speed is relatively slow, it's more about calmness under pressure than lightning-quick reflexes.

Like every other game in his studio's series, Q-Games head **Dylan Cuthbert** hopes that *PixelJunk Sidescroller* will show us something at once familiar and innovative. "I think the *PixelJunk* games are the purest form of our creativity here at Q," he says. "They concentrate on giving you something new – it might look familiar, but there's always something in there that you've never touched before.

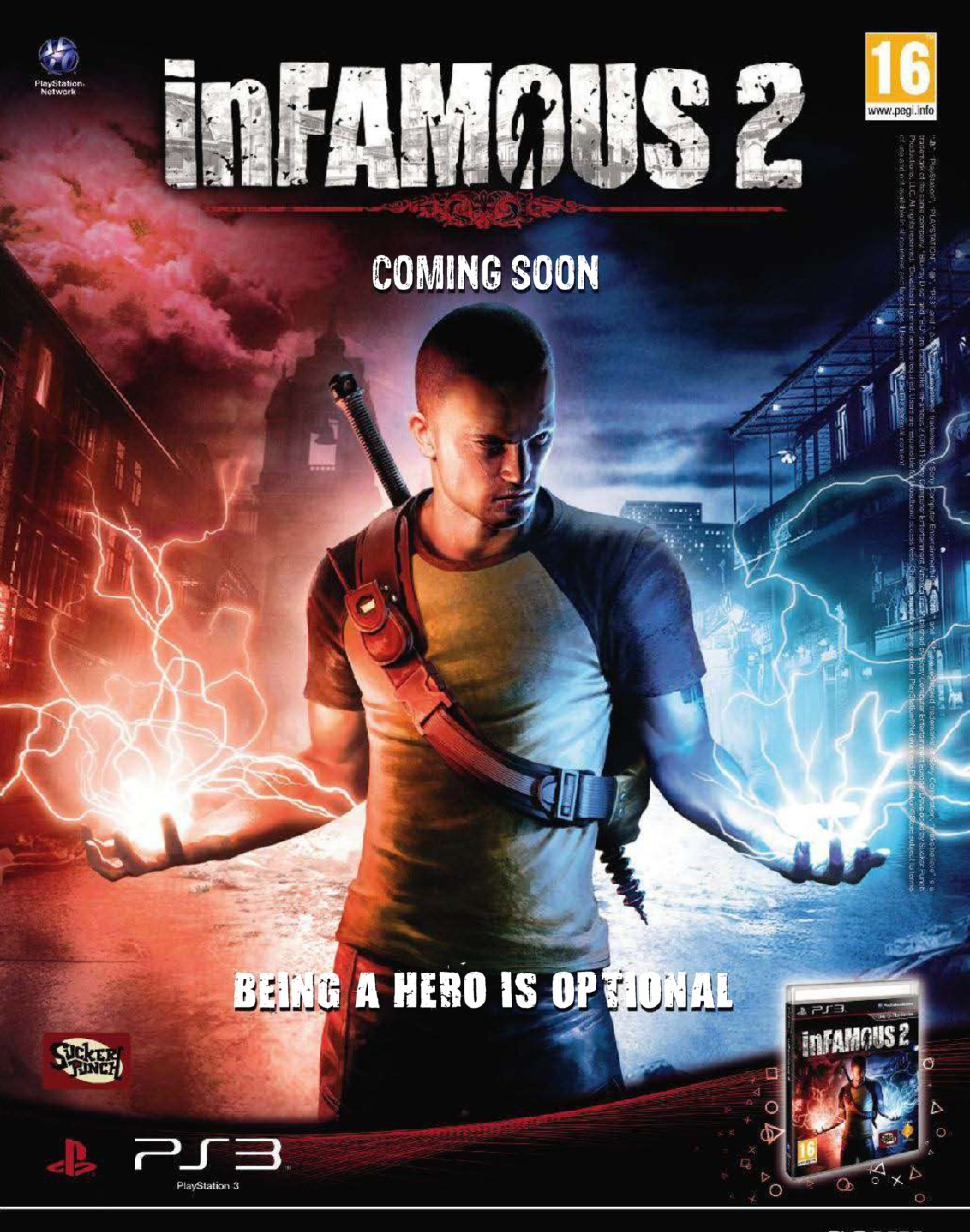
"For example, in *Shooter* and *Sidescroller* it's the liquids. You've probably played a game like this before, but you haven't played it in a world with so many interacting liquids. It's those ideas that we expand upon that are key for any *PixelJunk* game."

Aside from the life-saving water and that ever-present magma, we haven't seen any of the other gaseous, oily, undulating hazards that seeped through *Shooter*'s world. But Q-Games is keeping much more under wraps until closer to *Sidescroller*'s release – which is tentatively planned for later this year. It's not *PixelJunk Shooter* as fans would recognise it, but if there's one thing you can always expect from this studio, it's new ideas. ■

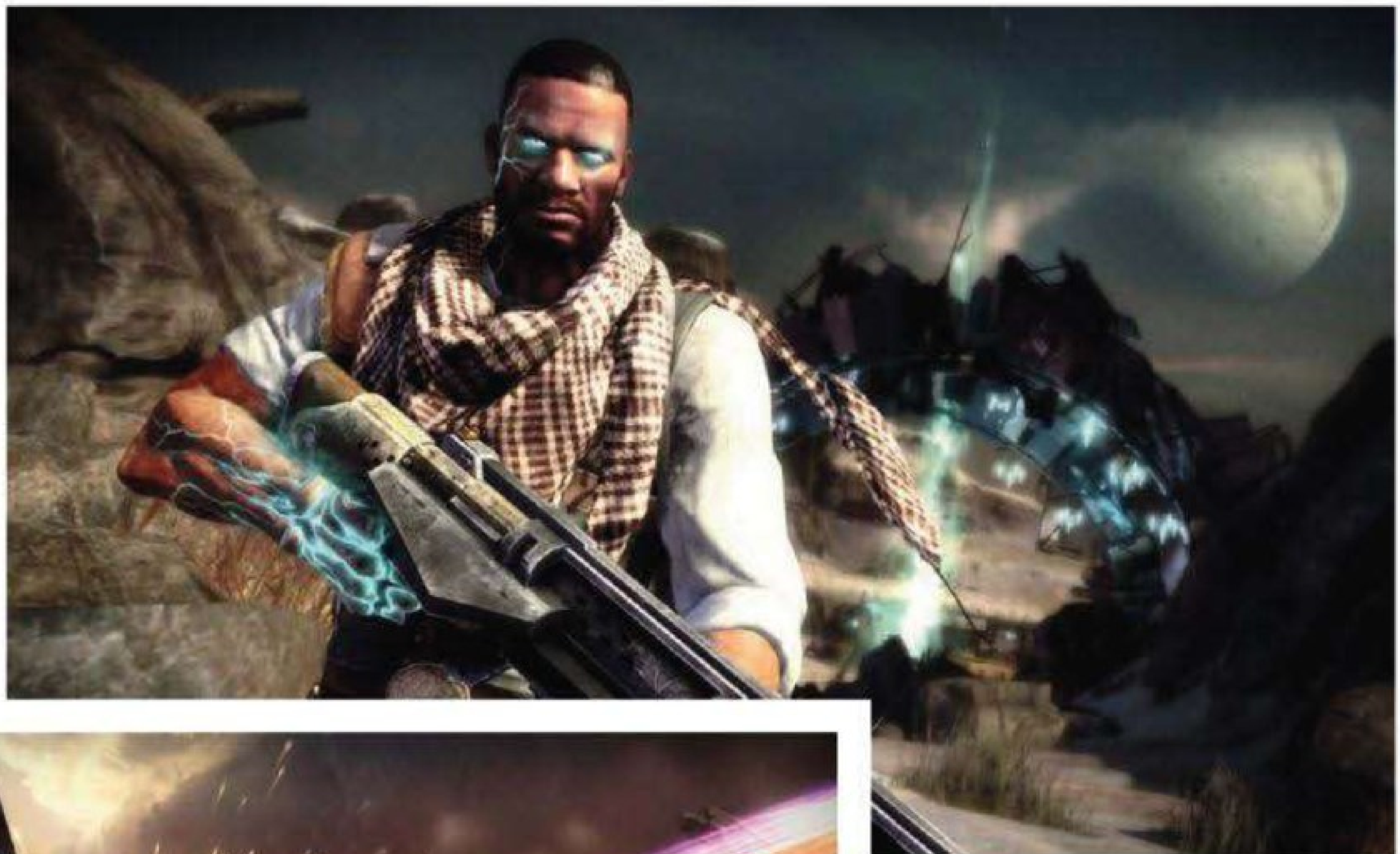


Resisting the tide

As a series of 2D retro revival games that are still unmistakeably products of their own time, the *PixelJunk* titles would surely find themselves at home on iOS – but Q-Games has no plans to explore that option just yet. According to **Shouichi Tominaga**, series director and development manager, touchscreen controls wouldn't be a comfortable fit. "One of the things we insist on in the *PixelJunk* series is quality of control," he says. "It has to feel good, and if that can't be brought to another platform then you're losing something in translation. We'd have to be sure that wouldn't happen, as it's very much part of the *PixelJunk* thing."


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Graves is on the hunt for his brother, the leader of the Outcasts. He's assisted by Sydney Cutter, the engineer who's responsible for implanting the regulator that holds him together



The Hawk aircraft are strike weapons, adept at destroying buildings and capable of aerial engagement. They can also be transformed mid-flight into these fearsome walkers







HYPE

STARHAWK

LightBox's strategic shooter stakes its claim on the final frontier

Format PS3
Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer LightBox Interactive
Origin US
Release 2012

bit.ly/mvVoly
Screenshot gallery



Vehicles like the jeeps can be piloted by multiple players, and have a similar solid feel to the *Halo* Warthog. They're especially useful during multiplayer capture-the-flag games

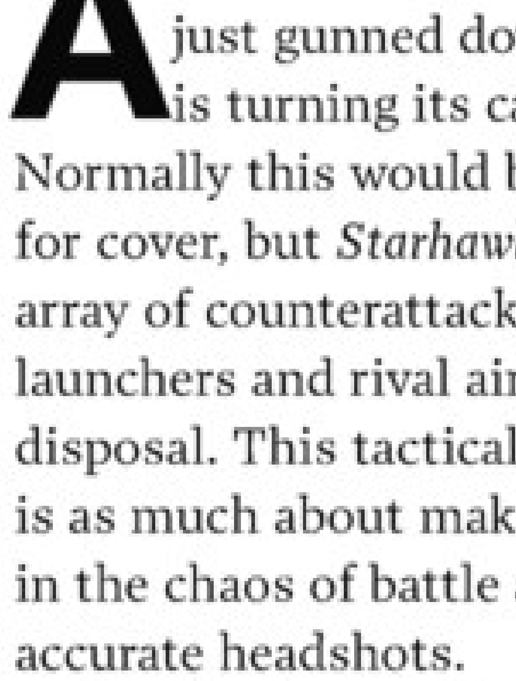
A 20-foot tall airborne mech has just gunned down your allies and is turning its cannons on you. Normally this would be the time to flee for cover, but *Starhawk* gives you an ample array of counterattack options: turrets, rocket launchers and rival aircraft are all at your disposal. This tactical thirdperson shooter is as much about making the correct choice in the chaos of battle as it is about nailing accurate headshots.

Starhawk expands on its predecessor *Warhawk* by adding a full singleplayer campaign – starring stoic protagonist Emmett Graves. Dressed in a billowing scarf and shining belt buckle, he's a pleasingly rugged frontier hero. If it wasn't for the hefty assault rifle, Graves could be right out of Deadwood – or perhaps more accurately, Joss Whedon's defunct sci-fi western Firefly. He's part of an interstellar pioneer operation based in the outer reaches of space, but instead of prospecting for gold, the miners in *Starhawk* are searching for rift geysers – crackling energy fountains that erupt from the arid moonscapes. Unfortunately, rifting has a cost; exposure causes humans to degenerate into fleshless beasts of bone and sinew. The resulting mutations, known as the Outcasts, form the antagonists of the campaign and one of the multiplayer factions. Graves has defied science by surviving contact with rift energy because of the raw, functional technology that staves off the degenerative effects.

We play an early level that has Graves repelling waves of Outcasts, securing a rift geyser and immediately making use of its creative properties. During the game you're able to use a system known as Build And Battle to manufacture a customised defence, spending rift energy accumulated by killing enemies. It's a tactical outlet that allows you to choose from a selection of structures as you fight; anti-personnel turrets can be called in to cut down Outcasts as they emerge from their drop pods, or bunkers constructed for defence. If the enemy begins to attack you with Hawk aircraft, you can shred them with surface-to-air cannons or take to the skies for an intense dogfight.

All of the features available in the campaign are available in multiplayer, and it's executed well enough that battlefields never become a confusion of misplaced walls and vehicles. Team co-op is encouraged, since a tactical dispersal of your rift energy will always serve you best: defending the flag is far easier when your team has cooperated to construct gated walls and lines of turrets instead of individually squandering all the energy on expensive aircraft. But despite the emphasis on team play, there's a strong feeling of ownership of each of the structures you've purchased with your own funds.

If all the new additions sound superfluous, rest assured that this is still undoubtedly a successor to *Warhawk*. The RTS elements support an already solid shooter, rather than confuse it. Even in these early stages the Build And Battle system feels like a logical extension of combat, mechanically expanding your tactical options. When faced with an opponent picking off your team members with a sniper rifle, standard shooter training might convince you to head for the safety of a bunker; you can do the same in *Starhawk*, but we opted to construct our own sniper tower and return fire. If that feels too sedate, you could spawn a launch pad and attack from the skies using the game's signature aircraft. For a genre that has such well-established drills, *Starhawk* looks to be making an exciting excursion into undiscovered territories. ■



Another game, another planet?

Any fans concerned that the interstellar setting might be too far removed from traditional *Warhawk* gameplay can take solace in the words of LightBox Interactive president **Dylan Jobe**. "The soul of the game [is] still very much *Warhawk*," he says. "That kind of addictive, over-the-top, arcade gameplay is still there. One of the businessy things we often do in development is focus tests. We tested traditional shooter fans, but 50 per cent of test groups were always *Warhawk* fans. We knew early on that we needed to make a game that was going to feel good for our fanbase. Our data showed that they loved it."

HYPE



FROM DUST

Humanity's lost, and it's up to you to pour sand on troubled waters

Format	360, PC, PS3
Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	Ubisoft Montpelier
Origin	France
Release	2011

From Dust's restless elemental physics are so robust that the game is as interesting to watch as it is to play. Put down the controller and observe: tsunamis will turn sand dunes into trenches of silt, while volcanoes dribble their magma into the sea, forming new peninsulas of glistening rock.

God games have rarely been as dynamic and primal, and they've seldom been as efficient at putting a god in its place, either. Forget the rapturous flourishes and numinous wailing of the soundtrack: in Eric Chahi's fascinating new experiment – the first game the developer of *Another World* and *Heart Of Darkness* has made in more than a decade – the almighty is little more than a harried go-between, sentenced to negotiate between the brutal forces of nature and the helpless remnants of humanity.

As the elements provide so much strategic complexity, the missions tend to keep things simple. Your main objective in *From Dust* is to lead your tribesmen from one side of each level to the other, slowly opening up the exit by capturing a series of idols as you go. Cast as a fidgety scribble of golden light, setting waypoints for your flock is a matter of hovering and clicking. The game circumnavigates most of the frustrations of dealing with unpredictable AI by showing you the path your followers intend to take as a shimmering white ribbon, which turns red when it meets an impasse.

Debugging this path provides much of the game's challenge, and you'll quickly get used to plotting a course, before racing ahead to break down obstacles. Although there are upgrades to unlock (an early example turns the sea to gel, allowing for some unnatural tactics that, thankfully, work as predictably as natural ones), for the most part you're a celestial dump truck, sucking up clods of earth, water or lava with one trigger and depositing them where needed with another.

So, to get your followers over a river, you might choose to take sand from a desert and drop it into the water until you've formed a temporary bridge. If you're looking for a more stable solution, however, you could pick up the water and drain it away. As the elements are set in ceaseless opposition, the brilliance of *From Dust* is that no one solution will ever work for long. Lava will slowly eat away at battlements of rock or cause nasty flash fires, while even the weakest streams will eventually carve deltas through any desert – and that's before your own clumsy tinkerings have thrown things even further into disarray.

From Dust's not above imposing hassles of its own when the mission calls for it, forcing you to capture a series of control points before the arrival of a tsunami, perhaps, or sending you towards an exit that's surrounded by lava. The game never lets design intrusions become too artificial, however, and the complexity of the simulation means that the world throws up unexpected means for you to fudge your way through just as easily as it sends new mountain ranges thrusting out of the oceans or allows tidal pressures to grind a single island into a scattered archipelago.

A rich Bahaman blend of golds and blues, *From Dust* looks like few other games, and its inspirations – volcanology and coastal erosion rather than *Populous* or *Black & White* – ensure that it feels like few others. With *Another World*, Chahi made the action platformer seem elegant, cinematic, and filled with human consequence. Now, he's made the god game unexpectedly religious by focusing not on the superhuman powers of mankind's protector, but on the terrible forces of nature mankind must be guarded against.



Everybody wants to rule the world

Beyond the campaign missions, focusing on an amnesiac tribe's attempt to recover its own history, *From Dust*'s metagame sees you steadily enlarging your followers' area of influence over each map until you've finally reclaimed the entire world. Capturing the idols scattered around each level will allow the tribe to construct spindly little villages nearby, and any land you render inhabitable while doing so will quickly sprout foliage and, eventually, attract the attention of primitive organisms. Part of the fun, of course, comes from setting things in motion and seeing whether it's order or chaos that ultimately wins the day.





Sand, bloom and mankind dwarfed by nature give *From Dust* a genuine sense of wonder at times. It's a god game built on a biblical scale





Your tribesmen are able to navigate the simplest of obstacles, but are otherwise entirely dependent on you. Character design is stylish and convincing

Capturing idols allows your followers to build villages and will seed the nearby environment with foliage. You'll earn some carefully metered special skills at the same time





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DARK SOULS

Even tougher than before – and the world is out to get you, too

Format	360, PS3
Publisher	Namco Bandai
Developer	From Software
Origin	Japan
Release	October





Despite not having the sensationalistic features of *Demon's Souls'* more grotesque enemies, the wolf's attack was memorably relentless. No wonder it's making a return in *Dark Souls*

There's a strong emphasis on the game's deep swordplay system, but magic is, of course, available and – as with weapons – is customisable throughout the adventure



bit.ly/k4uM2j
E226's *Dark Souls* cover feature



This beast looks sizeable, but judging from our demo of the Sen's Fortress level, in which a stony giant of similar size is felled as a prelude to the gargantuan Iron Golem, it's unlikely to qualify as a boss

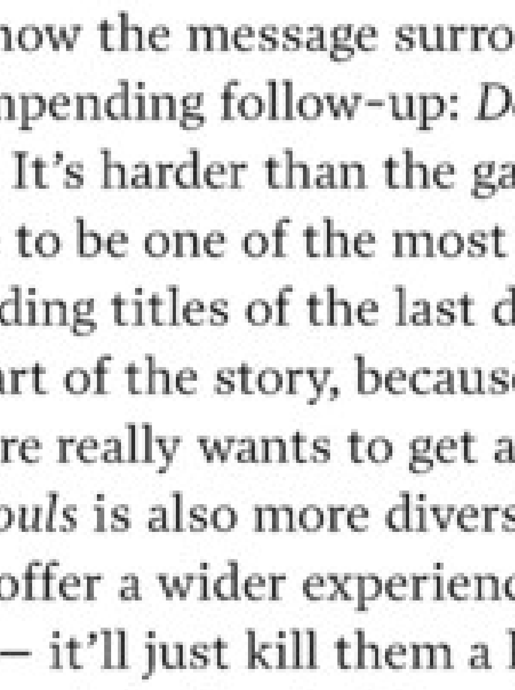
By now, all *Demon's Souls* fanatics will know the message surrounding its impending follow-up: *Dark Souls* is harder. It's harder than the game many players believe to be one of the most intensely demanding titles of the last decade. But that's only part of the story, because what From Software really wants to get across is that *Dark Souls* is also more diverse and adaptive. It will offer a wider experience to every player – it'll just kill them a lot on the way.

A case in point. At Namco's recent LevelUp event in Dubai, the publishing producer **Kei Hirono** showed us one location, a sprawling gothic castle called Sen's Fortress, which contains a mass of traps and trigger points. Step on the wrong flagstone and an arrow will shoot out of the wall. And in one room a treasure chest transforms into a monstrous walking mouth, complete with grasping arms that will pull knights into its toothy maw. There's no warning; this isn't a platformer. In *Dark Souls*, the environment is an enemy.

The set-piece area is a vast multi-layered chamber, criss-crossed by narrow walkways, each beset by rows of giant swinging pendulums requiring deft movement and precise timing to pass. It's an old action-adventure trick, the stuff of *Tomb Raider*, but there is a real sense of scale and sheer mechanical cruelty here; just when you think you're out, another pendulum challenge moves into view. Later, there are immense boulders that can splatter unwary adventurers; but a lever situated further up into the castle redirects them, turning the map into an interactive puzzle. Indeed, it looks as though scenic interaction will play a key role – as will subtle visual clues about forthcoming traps. At one point the character gets on an elevator that's covered in blood – as it ascends, the journey ends with the knight being impaled on spikes. So *that's* where the blood came from. It's useful to learn from those subtle signs in the *Dark Souls* universe.

As suggested in our feature in **E**226, it looks like equipment will be more customisable this time. Hirono hints that players will not only get to collect new items as they go, they'll also be able to evolve the armour, spells and weaponry along specific attribute trees, creating a highly personalised arsenal, and that environmental traps can also be used against enemies. Dungeon-dwellers, meanwhile, will vary in size and tactics. Throughout Sen's Fortress there are reptile-headed warriors whose modus operandi is to lurk in the dark, charging out at you from behind. There are also armoured knights who'll use intelligent covering mechanics to protect themselves. And at the summit of the fortress there are monstrous stony giants, who lob explosive boulders at the player. "Humans are very small in this world," comments Hirono wryly.

Apparently, the guiding concept behind this game is exploration. While *Demon's Souls* was essentially a series of dungeon crawls, this time round it's a seamless environment; from the battlements of one location, you may spy another building in the distance – and anything you see is reachable. This is perhaps the game's only concession to the wider audience that it's likely to garner. It's certainly no friendlier than its predecessor, but it looks set to provide a richer and more rewarding environment in which the pleasure of discovery will offset the pain of being hurled off a cliff by a giant or impaled on a spear trap you hadn't spotted. *Dark Souls* is still about death, but it's also about the amazing things you get to see on the way there.



Alone, online

We're promised that *Dark Souls* will build on the online modes of its predecessor. This time, players will be able to leave items for each other within singleplayer campaigns, as well as messages. More intriguingly, From Software has hinted that gamers will need to make decisions about their character's moral compass at the start of the game. So if you select an evil character, it could be that you get to provide a malevolent presence in online interactions. It also seems that larger end-of-level enemies, like the gigantic Iron Golem shown in the game's reveal trailer, might only be defeatable via co-op. More details are expected at E3.

HYPE

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA:

OCARINA OF TIME 3D

Will the greatest game of all be as good as you remember?

Format 3DS
Publisher Nintendo
Developer Grezzo
Origin Japan
Release June 17



The *Legend Of Zelda* games, so the story goes, are Shigeru Miyamoto's childhood wanderings rendered in sprites and polygons. Thanks to his work, many people's childhood wanderings *were* among sprites and polygons. The process comes full circle in *Ocarina Of Time 3D*, as the distant memory of the 1998 adventure is buffed to a 2011 sheen. Grezzo (under the watchful eye of *Secret Of Mana* creator Koichi Ishii) invites youngsters to see what life was like before Master Chief and data breaches. Life was good, it seems.

Make no mistake, this is inch-for-inch *Ocarina*. Not some tampered-with director's cut, but a visual remaster (the sound still honks in merry MIDI). So while it is the same distance from Link's Kokiri hut to the Deku Tree, the grass is greener and dotted with clover and leafy fronds. The forest guardian himself is in particularly good shape, considering the beasties that gnaw away inside his guts. Textures are sharpened, edges softened. Interior decorators touch up Goron City's murals, unseen janitors clean the Temple of Time's marble floor to a reflective shine. For a 13-year-old game, it doesn't look a day over five.

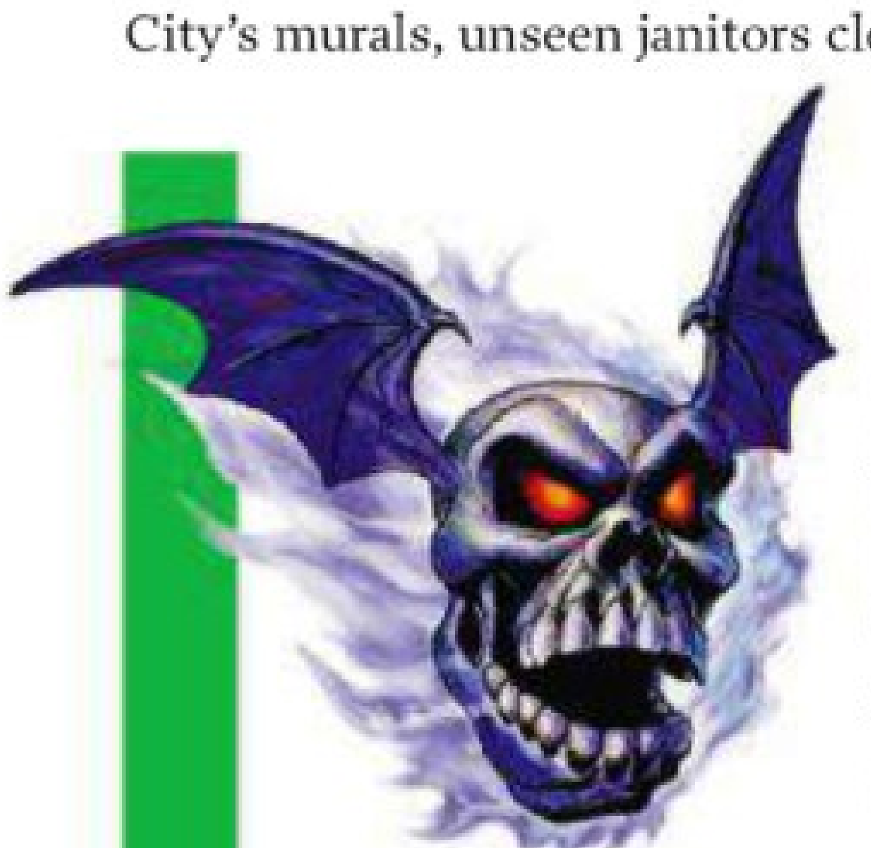
This is Hyrule as imagined by concept artists. Character models are brought in line with the original sketches, Link's face a sculpted visage of wide-eyed wonder where once an origami smear sufficed. Replaying also reminds us how little Nintendo has strayed from the Hyrulian fundamentals since *Ocarina*; ten iterations on, the flavour and tone all starts here.

The 3D is judiciously used, subtly reinforcing pre-existing dimensions as opposed to poking us in the eye with theatrical gimmicks. And so Hyrule Field rolls away into the distance where Death Mountain stands noticeably tall. That said, a 3D massaging of *Ocarina*'s more epic sights never quite makes up for the impact lost on a small screen. Sunrise over Lake Hylia resembles a toybox diorama; grown men wept in 1998.

This time round, *Ocarina*'s dungeons stand out most. Compacted on the tiny screen, they resemble architectural models, their looping paths and puzzle pieces clicking into clever wholes. Nintendo remains the undisputed king of 3D space.

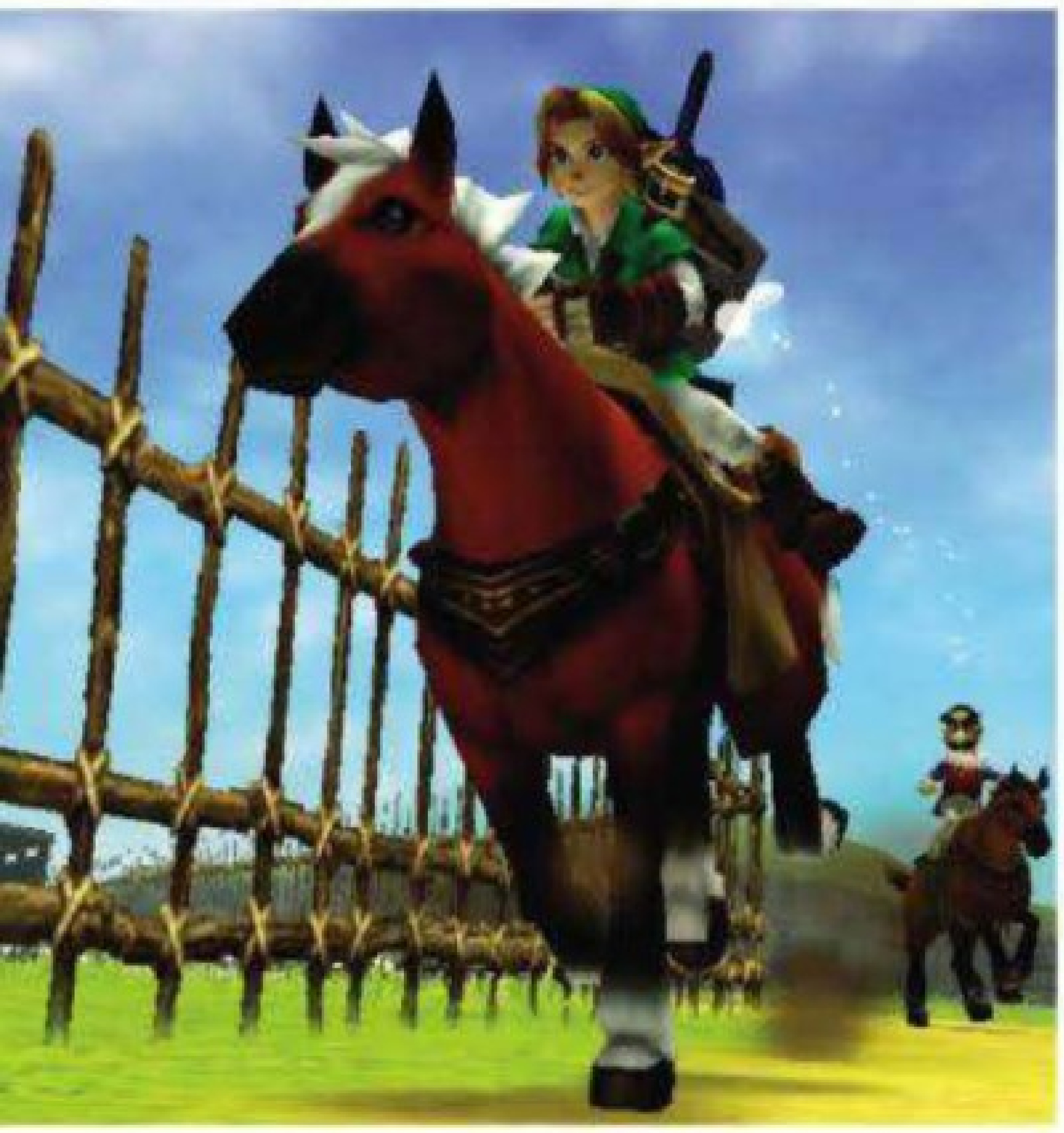
The 3D effect does liven up the combat. It's easy to forget how cinematic Link's lock-on is. L-targeting (migrating from N64's Z) lowers the camera into the action and tracks Link's movements in relation to the enemy, ensuring both combat ease and artful framing, the latter benefiting from the extra depth. There's a giddy thrill in having an enemy leapfrog over Link, or watching it flip backwards to avoid an arcing blade. The 3DS hardware also offers a friendlier interface: a touchscreen inventory eases kit management, while two touchscreen item slots work with the face buttons to give Link easy access to four items at any one time.

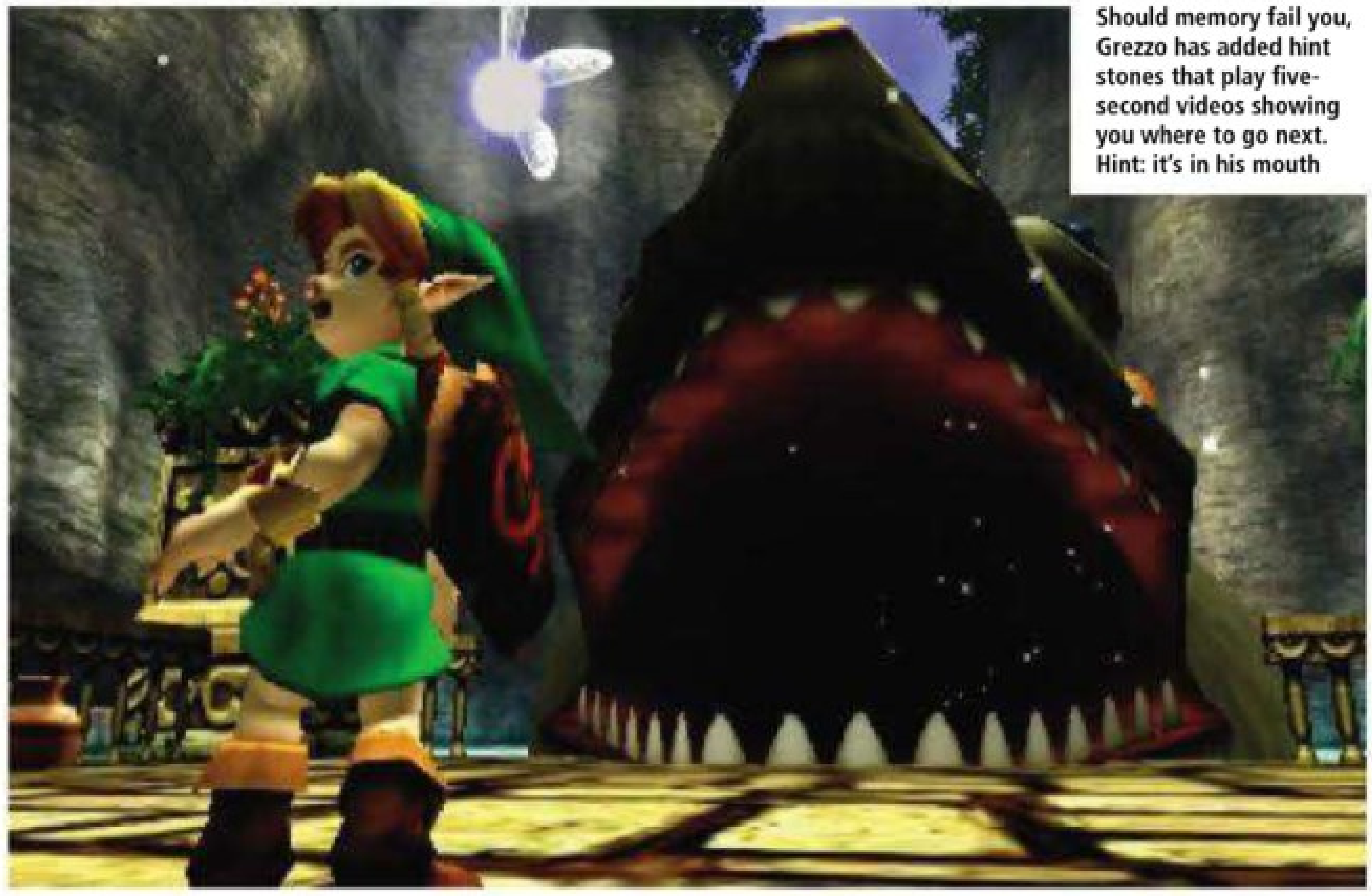
In a world where even new *Zelda*s are accused of repetition, can an outright remake impress? The familiarity of the first ten hours doesn't impact the pleasure of seeing them on such good form. Like an old childhood pal, it tells the same anecdotes with a few fun, if hazily remembered, exaggerations. Seasoned adventurers are promised the recalibrated Master Quest (see 'Remastered quest'), but only upon completion – a big investment for a relatively unchanged reward. Elsewhere, the addition of a boss-rush mode only confirms what we already knew: *Ocarina* was complete the first time round; expanding on it would be a struggle. Envy the newcomers who get to experience that completeness afresh. ■



Remastered quest

Released as a promotional bonus with *Wind Waker*, *Master Quest* is *Ocarina*: Remix, a leftover from the never-released 64DD *Ocarina* expansion, *Ura Zelda*. While structurally identical it jumbles up the specific details: items don't appear where you remember them, and dungeons unfold along new routes (we particularly like the cows freshly lining the walls of Jabu-Jabu's guts). The 3DS version sees further meddling. Enemies hit twice as hard, which makes *Master Quest* a lot more combat oriented. The entire game is also mirrored, neatly disorientating, even if it does transform Link from lefty to righty. Fanboys, attack!





Should memory fail you, Grezzo has added hint stones that play five-second videos showing you where to go next. Hint: it's in his mouth

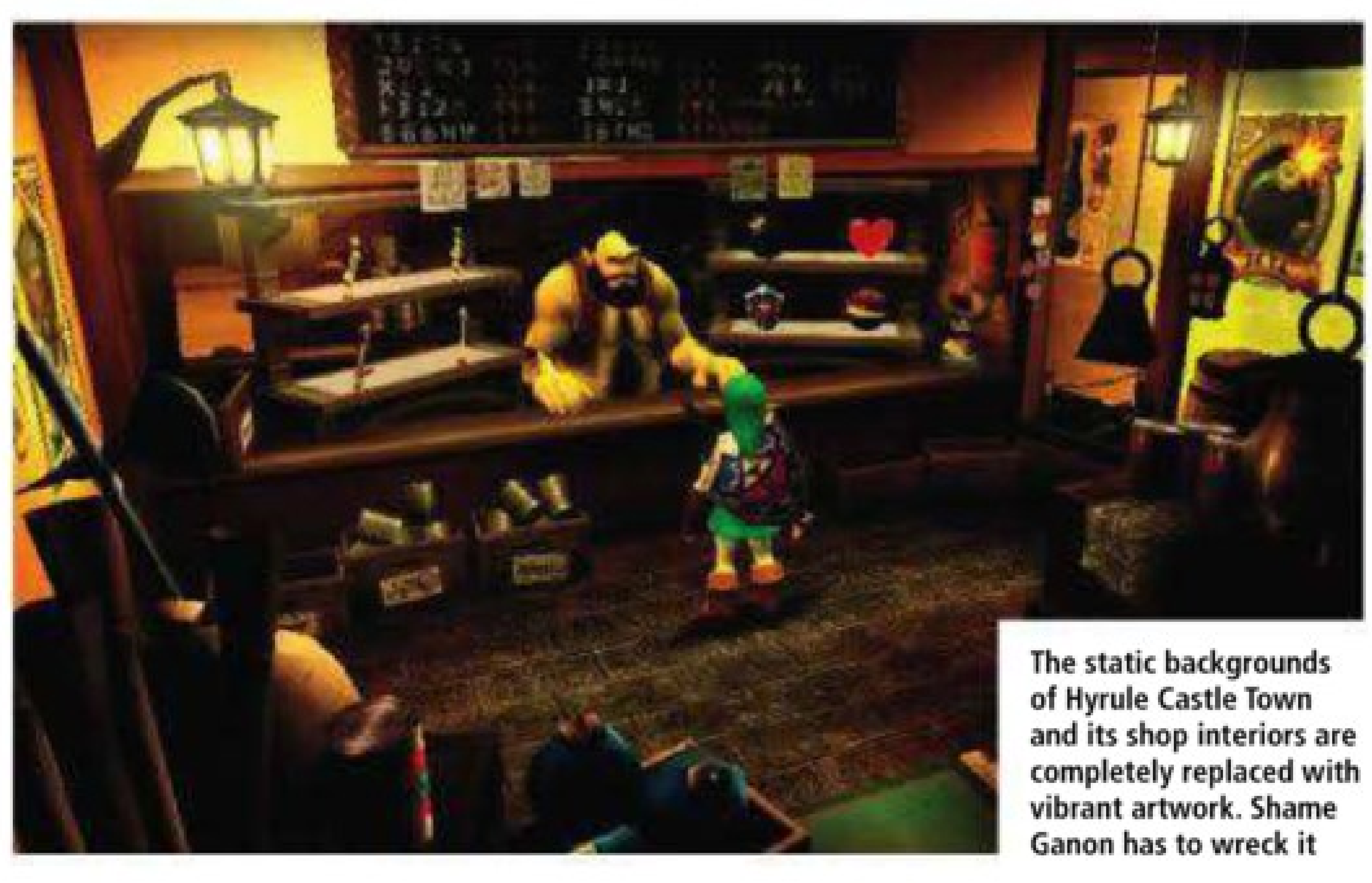


Hopping Link into his Kokiri Forest bed allows him to replay boss encounters in his dreams. Replay every boss and you can tackle them all as a boss rush







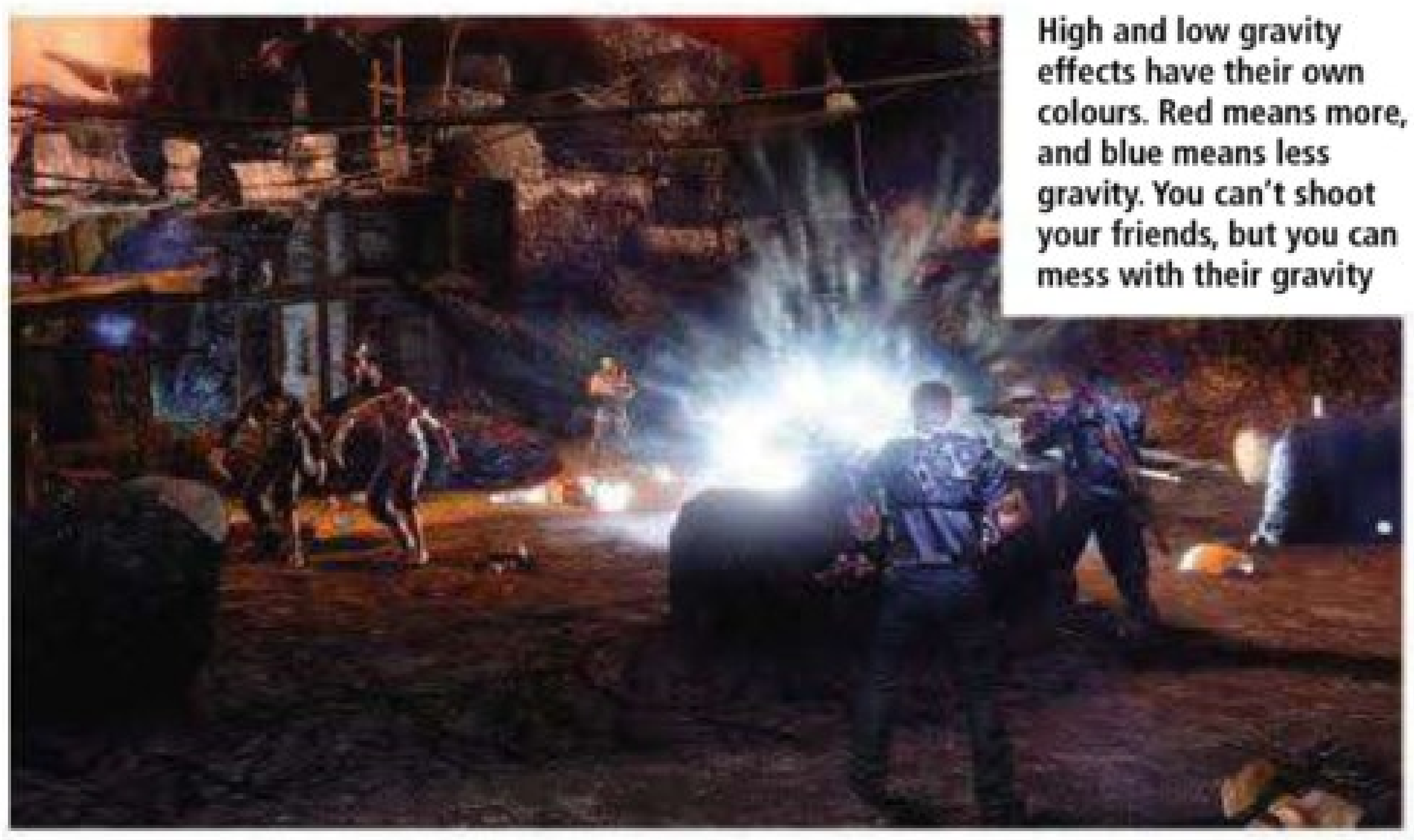


The static backgrounds of Hyrule Castle Town and its shop interiors are completely replaced with vibrant artwork. Shame Ganon has to wreck it



Our demo revealed a game that is, at heart, a cover-based shooter. The gravity gives you new ways to flush (or rather, float) enemies out of cover, but the gunplay is a familiar experience





High and low gravity effects have their own colours. Red means more, and blue means less gravity. You can't shoot your friends, but you can mess with their gravity





The Gravlink device also works as a *Half-Life 2* gravity gun, allowing you to pick up objects and propel them at your foes. There'll be times where you're dragged out of cover yourself

H Y
P E



INVERSION

Hey, what's up with the gravity in this place?

Format 360, PS3
Publisher Namco Bandai
Developer Saber Interactive
Origin US
Release February 2012

Saber Interactive has a problem with universal concepts. With *TimeShift* in 2007, it created a small paradox that had nothing to do with time travel – a game that managed to be equally memorable and forgettable. It was a game in which the basic time-manipulation mechanic generated a lot of fondness, but the lame story and characters made it impossible to love. Imagine *Portal 2* minus the script, then divided by ten.

Now Saber has turned its attention to gravity, and is promising not to make the same mistakes. "I think where *TimeShift* failed was that the story wasn't well-integrated, and felt tacked on," explains producer **Rick White**. "The primary lesson we took was to make sure that the story and game design are well-planned from the beginning. We also think that the gravity mechanic is a much more natural extension of shooting gameplay."

Inversion takes place on 'The Planet' – there's a possibly meaningful reluctance to call it Earth – with Davis Russell the protagonist cop and Leo Delgado as his co-op partner. The serious, dramatic motives all belong to Davis – it's his wife who's killed, and his daughter kidnapped by the invading Lutadores. The Lutadores are described as alien, but it's also possibly meaningful that they look extremely human. So, Davis is given the emotional motives, and Delgado is left with script gems such as: "It's boom-boom time." We can only imagine that the scriptwriter briefly let his six-year-old son have a go.

Gravity-play and shooters are more than nodding acquaintances – *Half-Life 2*, *Prey* and *Dead Space* all toyed with the idea – but *Inversion* bets the cover-based farm on the concept. It's a three-pronged attack on a natural phenomenon. The most spectacular are the huge anomalies affecting large areas.

The second prong are the 'vector changes'. You can't just run up walls, but there are white glowing vector changes that flip your personal gravity. You can also throw grenades through them, and they'll land on the wall. In later levels, it gets more intense: one cavernous map has the Lutadores both on walls and the ceiling. You can join them by using glowing white conduits.

Finally, there's your wrist-mounted Gravlink unit, which both co-op players enjoy. Both a weapon and a puzzle-solver, you can use it to increase and decrease gravity. This floats enemies out of cover or pins them to the floor, causes items to drop and has "a number of unique functions that we will reveal over the coming months."

There are a few side effects of messing with gravity that you expect to see, but don't. For example, enemies in a zero-G bubble from your Gravlink don't currently explode sideways if you burst a barrel next to them – they simply drop to the floor. And hovering rubble doesn't move when you barnacle yourself on to it for cover. It's hardly essential stuff, but definitely makes for some missed opportunities for wow moments.

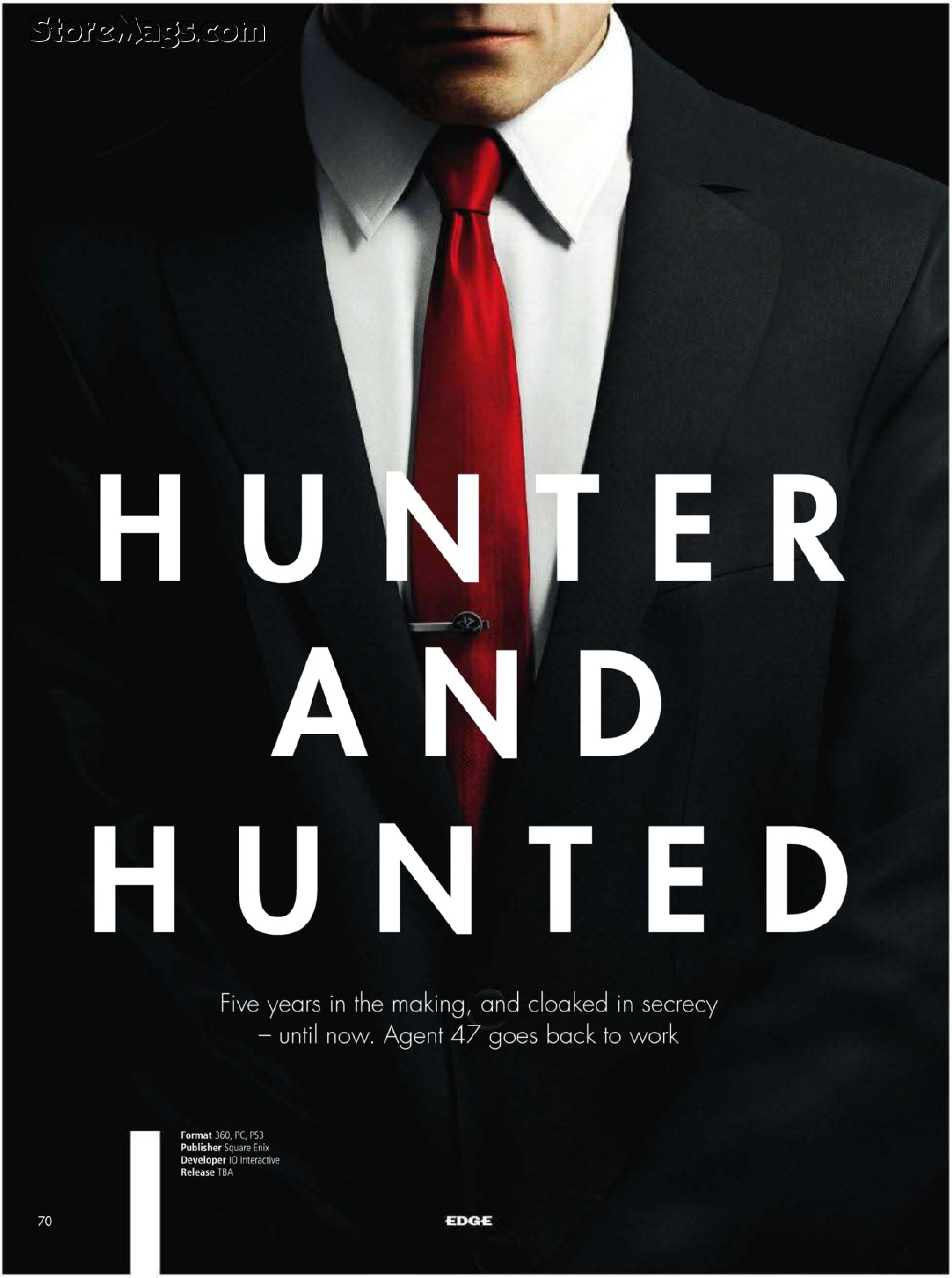
While *Inversion* is looking great, White doesn't see that as a reason to snap his braces and strut around: "Having visuals that compete with other triple-A titles isn't a feature that should be touted. It's something that we just need to deliver on."

Even so, it's good to see that Saber's in-house engine has kept the pace, and the use of Havok physics allows for some structural damage. It's these unexpected moments of pleasure that could – if they're stitched together with enough regularity – help Saber to smash through its six-out-of-ten glass ceiling.



Gap year

So, what has Saber been doing since the announcement of *Inversion* a year ago? White says: "We've been hard at work making the strongest possible alpha. Namco understands the importance of getting the gameplay right, and has given us the time and resources to make this happen. We've used this time to ensure that the core mechanics are solidly executed, but also to ensure that the unique elements of the game are tightly woven into the experience. We don't want gravity to be a gimmick – it's a key part of the game." Lest we forget, Saber also made the *Battle: Los Angeles* game.



HUNTER AND HUNTED

Five years in the making, and cloaked in secrecy – until now. Agent 47 goes back to work

Format 360, PC, PS3
Publisher Square Enix
Developer IO Interactive
Release TBA

The perfect hit takes time, cunning, ruthlessness, and creativity – all useful traits in Agent 47's particular line of work. But as any fan of the series will tell you, patience is key. And *Hitman*'s fans have been very, very patient, awaiting a new entry in IO Interactive's stealth-based assassination series since *Blood Money*, released in 2006. In the intervening years, the studio released cute action-adventure game *Mini Ninjas*, two *Kane & Lynch* titles, and had its parent company Eidos purchased by Square Enix. But as far as *Hitman* was concerned, IO seemed resolutely quiet.

Perhaps that's why game director **Tore Blystad** looks slightly nervous. We're sitting in what might well be the only darkened room in IO's otherwise bright and airy offices, a room which the developers alternately refer to as 'the war room' and, on occasion, 'the *Hitman* room'. The latter seems more apt, since the walls are covered with *Hitman* concept art, most of which shows dark and dank environments, but one piece in particular stands out. The page in question contains a pair of drawings of the always impeccably, if funereally, dressed 47 shirtless, offering a rare glimpse of the pale, scarred torso beneath.

At the centre of the room lies the cause of Blystad's nervousness: a television, which, in a few short moments, will be demonstrating *Hitman: Absolution* to outside eyes for the first time. For the moment, however, it merely shows a rain-splattered window, looking out onto a stormy city at night, half-hidden by the title of the game.

"This is a very special day for me," begins Blystad. "One I've been waiting for for a long time." Blystad, who first worked on *Hitman: Contracts*, was *Blood Money*'s art director, and has been working on *Absolution* in some form since the completion of that game. He sets the scene, informing us that the city beyond the rainy window is Chicago – "a good place for a hitman to lie low" – and that the Agent 47 we're about to meet isn't on a hit, but on the run. And then our demo begins.





ABOVE **Game director Tore Blystad, who's been working on *Absolution* since its inception.** TOP **Christian Elverdam, gameplay director**

The window smashes to pieces as a familiar bald and besuited form crashes through it, then dives out of sight. As the camera pans around, we see the building 47 has just broken into is a library – and a library rapidly filling with members of the Chicago Police Department at that. When the camera finally catches up with 47, he's taking cover behind a pillar on the first floor. A close-up on his face reveals two things – that IO's Glacier 2 engine (see 'Tools of the trade') is capable of rendering faces with astonishing detail, and an Agent 47 who looks calm, but distinctly under pressure.

Seconds pass before the first changes to the series formula become apparent. Agent 47 occupies the scene's foreground, with the CPD spreading out to explore the stacks below. As we watch, 47 drops lithely to the floor, slinking along railings and sticking to book stacks using what is unmistakably a cover mechanic. The assassin has always been stealthy, but also cumbersome. He's never moved this gracefully.

"We wanted the player to feel like the ultimate assassin and not just have the fantasy on the box cover," explains Blystad. "Most people, I mean normal humans, when they play *Hitman* games – the old games – they kind of feel like a rubbish assassin that just has to bring out his guns and then start shooting everybody. Movements and the controls should be easy to use."

Gameplay director **Christian Elverdam** interjects: "We spent a lot of time making core movement very responsive, because in *Hitman*, if you overstep a little bit and you get busted, you don't really appreciate that, right? So we really worked hard on making it ultra-snappy. As for the cover system, it's a choice whether you want to use it or not. We made it so that if you are crouched and moving around, you are below cover height."

The 47 of old could stay out of sight when he needed to, but there was an



ungainly quality to his moveset. If you found yourself somewhere out of bounds, it was better to be disguised than hidden. But if the demo is anything to go by, 47 can now creep, skulk and stalk with the best of this generation's stealthy protagonists.

He's borrowed some other tricks from them, too. Down on the ground floor, 47 hides behind a bookshelf while cops patrol the stacks. The screen darkens, and enemies begin burning with a red glow. This is Instinct mode, which works similarly to the Detective mode in *Arkham Asylum*, albeit with some improvements. As well as allowing 47 to monitor enemy movements through walls, burning-red trails highlight the patrol routes enemies are about to take, and the mode highlights points of interest such as climbable ledges and vents, too. As with the smoother controls and cover system, it's a calculated addition, designed to improve the player's ability to duck and weave among enemies and improvise responses to their behaviour. This new feature will be restricted in use, powered by a bar that refills as a reward for silent, stealthy takedowns.

Most importantly, Instinct mode replaces the map screen from previous *Hitman* games – which, on normal difficulty at least, gave 47 exterior and interior views of the locations he infiltrated, letting him track guard movements anywhere in the level.

"People were playing in a top-down mode rather than sitting in the game and making choices based on what is on the screen", explains Blystad. "The AI is doing a lot of stuff. In the old games they would have patrol paths that could be ten minutes long. We'd rather have them do more organic paths, and we found that we needed a tool for the player to be able to anticipate whatever the AI would be doing, so that they could feel safe and not be busted at any random time."

A mini-map in the corner of the screen retains one of the old map's more useful functions – highlighting points of interest nearby. In previous *Hitman* games, a strobing exclamation point could represent anything – a discarded waiter's outfit, a weapon, your mark's dinner or even a fusebox like the one 47 is creeping up to now. When the police entered the library, they switched on the lights, so 47 tears out the fuses to plunge the room back into darkness. As two cops come to investigate, he uses Instinct to predict and avoid their paths and heads into the next room. As he passes by them in the dark, *Absolution's*



IO promises that players after a Silent Assassin ranking will be able to make their way through a level without being seen. Elverdam explains: "We really try to tease you a lot – if you're playing stealthily you will probably come across a very big shotgun or some exploding barrels. It'll be up to you to stay in character"



INSTINCT MODE WORKS SIMILARLY TO THE DETECTIVE MODE IN ARKHAM ASYLUM, ALBEIT WITH IMPROVEMENTS



new take on the series' threat meter appears: a grey circle in the centre of the screen, the edges of which occasionally protrude in order to signify the direction from which 47 has been spotted. These particular police have no idea he's there, and its edges barely flicker.

A little way through the library now, and we can see cops massing at the exit. Just one problem: 47 is unarmed, a fact that doesn't stop him creeping up behind and choking one of the guards at the edges of stacks. The next guard is even more unlucky: 47 sneaks up behind him, grabbing a power cord from a lamp to use as a garrotte, silently dragging his victim to the floor. "It's very much part of the fantasy of being the ultimate hitman," Blystad says. "Being able to use any kind of tool, down to your bare hands. There's a lot of improvised weapons that are built into the environments and are unique to their settings."

"It's also about dark humour," Elverdam adds, as 47 picks up a small replica Roman bust and smashes it into the back of an unsuspecting cop's skull.

Interestingly, whereas the previous games required 47 to use his slightly odd, shuffling sneak animation to creep up on guards, now he strides more purposely towards them. "If you come from behind, 47 will be silent," explains Elverdam. "You'll be messy and louder coming from the front. That's kind of a contract you have with the game."

Agent 47's escape from the library is certainly messy and loud. Having crept to the entrance of the building, he spots a guard on the edges of the group, fiddling with his flashlight. Rather than taking him down, the assassin takes him hostage, strolling out in front of a small crowd of armed police with a human shield. While the hostage mechanic isn't new, the AI certainly is – the cops fan out convincingly to keep their guns trained on 47 as he backtracks towards the door, and all the while his hostage pleads with the police captain not to fire.

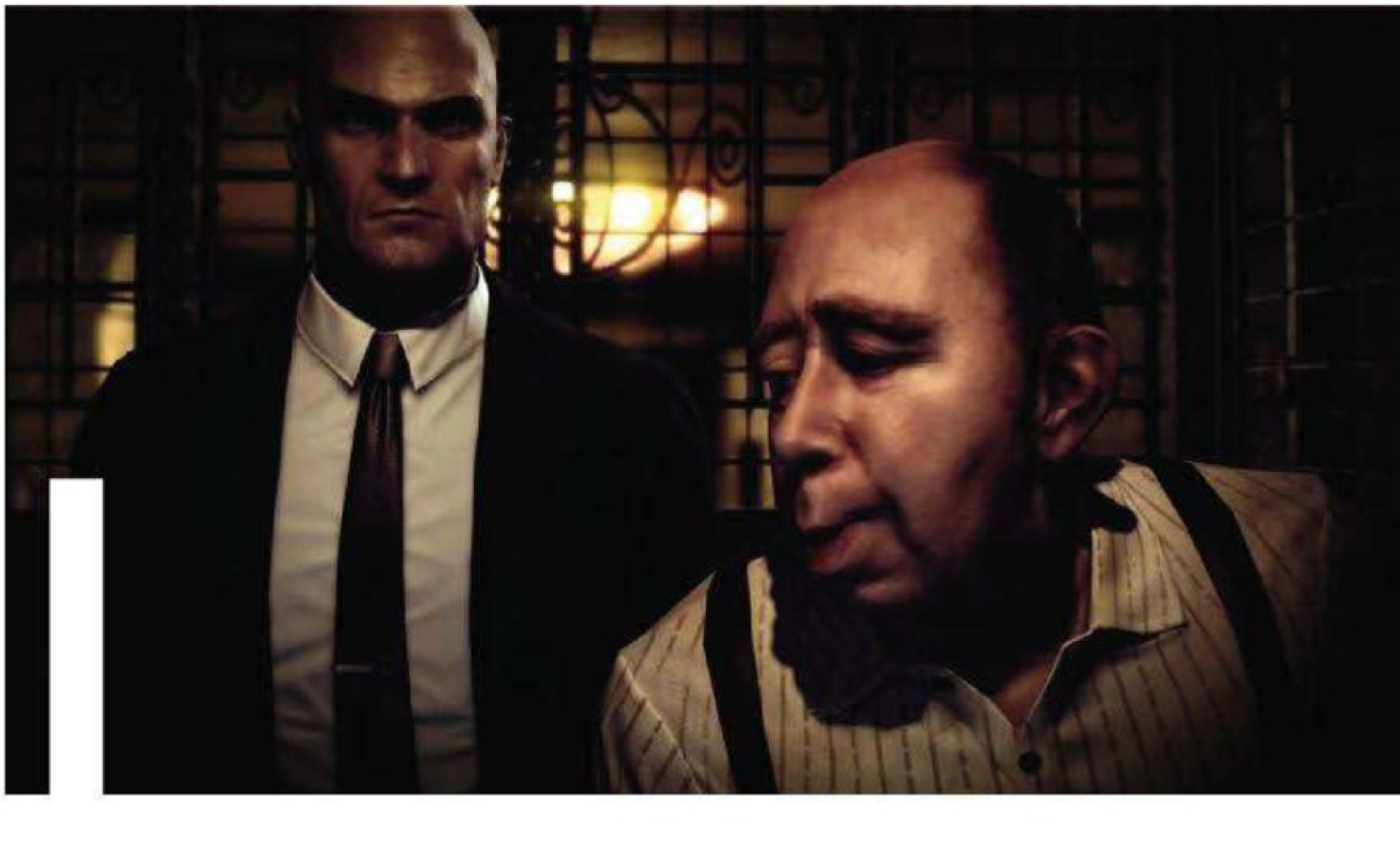
This escape segues into a gun battle up a stairway, with both the new Instinct powers and cover mechanics proving their flexibility under fire. The stairway is unlit and rain pours through a hole in the roof, but Instinct allows 47 to pick out his assailants. The cover system, meanwhile, works exactly as you'd expect. Which is to say: a whole lot better than the traditionally clunky combat from previous games.

What we've seen so far has been a choreographed playthrough of a sandbox level, designed to show off 47's new moves. There are plenty of alternative approaches, of course. He could have easily shot his way out of the library, or snatched a downed cop's outfit for a convenient disguise. But sandbox or not, this closed-off and self-contained library segment is simply one part of a greater whole. For the first time in the *Hitman* series, levels will be divided into discrete checkpoints. Many of these will be as large and open-ended as the levels from previous *Hitman* games, but others, like the library segment we've just seen, will be tighter, more focused sandboxes.

"Old levels were built like a checklist," Blystad explains. "There were all these elements we had to have: we had to have a fusebox, we had to have a hiding closet, a body container, yada yada yada. Now it's



ABOVE We gather that the level we've seen takes place early in the game, as 47 enters the library unequipped. According to IO, improvised and stolen weaponry, such as a nightstick, is more important early on, with 47 gaining in strength and resources as the game continues. It can't be too far in before the silenced silverballers return, though



When we saw this elevator ride, 47 was in a police uniform, and the clueless tenant heaped praise on the killer for his work protecting and serving the inhabitants of Chicago. It's the innocent bystanders who have always marked the amoral *Hitman* players from the true sadists – do you avoid collateral damage or slit their throats for a disguise?



"THE PACING ALLOWS FOR MORE STORY-DRIVEN ELEMENTS. YOU'RE NOT ALWAYS IN EXPLORATION MODE"

more 'what's the focus on this checkpoint? What's the focus on this level?' and we build everything around that. We can say: 'OK, there are no hiding places on this level' and that's completely fine because we can build the gameplay around that."

The point is not that the classic *Hitman* gameplay has disappeared – many levels will still take place in large, sandbox environments complete with unsuspecting targets – it's that IO hopes to build a greater variety of gameplay challenges around that core. Certainly, what we see next, as 47 makes his way to the top of the staircase and out on to the rooftop, simply couldn't have happened in a previous *Hitman* game.

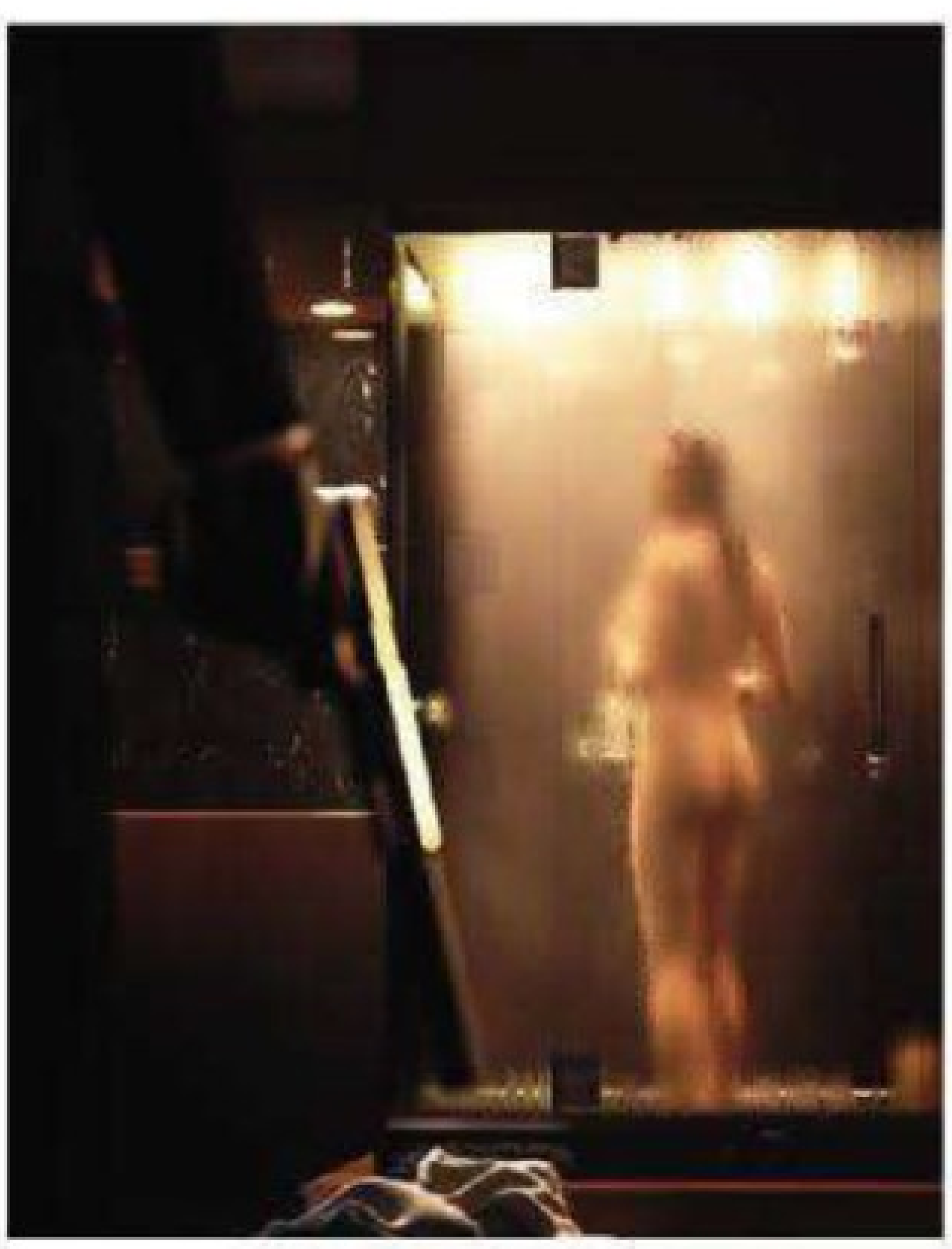
A helicopter lays in wait for 47, hovering beneath the storm. When it spots him it immediately opens fire, setting up a brief and breathlessly paced set-piece in which 47 escapes the chopper's guns by weaving between available pieces of cover. Despite being over quickly, its scripted, unavoidable nature marks a significant departure for the series.

"We need some pacing tools in the game," explains Blystad. "They're contained enough that the classic *Hitman* player won't mind them, and they'll get an experience that they wouldn't normally have, and we can put more focus on the production side and make an interesting helicopter moment, rather than a generic one that would have to take everything into consideration: 'Are you playing action? Are you playing stealth?'"

"It allows some more story-driven elements," adds Elverdam. "This level is *very* story-driven, and others are way more explorative, and that's how we've paced the game. It's actually quite refreshing – you're not always in exploration mode." Another bonus of the checkpoint system is that it allows what IO refers to as 'containment-based gameplay' – players will be able to restrict their foul-ups to one section of an environment rather than inciting the wrath of a whole level's guards.

Nonetheless, what happens next is more familiar. The helicopter has lost 47, who's hiding in what appears to be the rooftop generator closet of an apartment building. The helicopter has its searchlight trained firmly on the large patch of empty space between this room and an entrance to the apartments, and a police officer walking towards 47's hiding place. He doesn't last long, as 47 springs from the shadows, subdues him, and takes his clothes as a disguise, before walking straight out beneath the searchlight's glare and into the building.

And into another world entirely. After darkened libraries and rain-slashed rooftops, it's almost surreal to be thrown into the warm, multicoloured confines of what appears to be a small hippie commune – complete with peace signs on the wall and a distinct smoky haze. The apartment's inhabitants panic among themselves about the significant police presence outside – one hurriedly runs off to drown a stash of marijuana in the toilet. Perhaps taking a cue from their rather anti-authority chatter, 47 elects to stay out of sight. "Having a disguise doesn't mean you'll be able to fool everybody," says Blystad, "or that you'll be



Agent 47's targets have traditionally been corrupt politicians, child molesters, drug barons and other undesirables. They've also been – almost – exclusively male. While the finished game may reveal that the woman pictured here deserves a bullet as much as the rest, this target's vulnerability emphasises the game's darker tone

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

The delay between *Blood Money* and *Absolution* was caused by IO's decision to build a new engine – Glacier 2 – for the game. "We needed the time to build completely new technology from the ground up", explains Blystad. "We can do a lot of realtime editing which makes complex scenarios much easier to do now than before. The old engine was very archaic. Every little change you did – if the artist moved one light on the level – you had to repack the entire level and it would take hours to test out your stuff. Now we can basically test in realtime – when we do the lighting pass for 47 the artist basically plays the level and puts the spotlight where he wants it."



Agent 47's hand-to-hand skills appear to have markedly improved, though multiple foes – especially armed ones – still seem to pose a serious threat. The combat we've seen has less of a kung-fu vibe than the above image suggests, however, with 47 opting for brutal economy when face to face with an unsuspecting cop

ON THE HUNT

While IO remains mostly tight-lipped about *Absolution*'s story, it seems that the plot will be more personal for 47 than that of *Blood Money*. 47 is "out for the truth," according to Elverdam, who also reveals that 47 will know some of his targets. *Blood Money* ended with 47's employer, The Agency, in tatters. Nonetheless, the return of 47's handler, Diana, is confirmed (now played by Lost star Marsha Thomason), and IO suggests that *Absolution* will highlight aspects of 47's personality unexplored in previous games.

able to bluff your way past any group of NPCs." As if to further illustrate the point, police raid the apartment – and the two officers entering the room are immediately suspicious of the uniformed cop who seems to have beaten them there. Knocking out one of the cops with a bong stolen from a passed-out hippie, 47 downs the other with some surprisingly effective hand-to-hand moves. "Even with your bare hands," explains Elverdam, "you're super-brutal. It's about isolating people – one versus one, you should never be afraid."

Leaving a collection of unconscious cops and beatniks behind him, 47 strolls out into the hallway, which just so happens to be packed with police. IO uses the opportunity to show off another use of 47's Instinct power. A small group of cops exits an elevator, heading straight for 47. Elverdam explains that, the more eyes that are on you, the faster the threat meter will fill. It's certainly looking twitchy now, as the cops audibly discuss why 47 is heading the other way. Pressing the Instinct button, however, temporarily increases the effectiveness of his disguise – in this instance, it causes 47 to incline his head towards his police radio while walking past the cops.

At the bottom of the building lies 47's final hurdle – a fully armed SWAT team. The disguise alone isn't enough to get past them, and 47 used up much of his Instinct reserves in order to bluff his way past the cops on the top floor. There's one last tactic he can use, however: depending on his disguise, 47 can find designated safe spots around levels. He's currently dressed as a cop, so in this instance a nearby box of doughnuts will serve: 47 walks up to the box and inspects its contents – as long as he remains in this relatively inconspicuous position, he will also remain undisturbed. "In these safe spots you'll be completely safe in that disguise for as long as you want", explains Blystad, "so even if the room's filled with cops you can still stand, look at the area, and plan out your next move."

In this instance, an additional move is unnecessary. While 47 hunches over the sugary treats, the SWAT team heads upstairs. 47 strolls calmly out of the building, where he's enveloped by the waiting crowd.

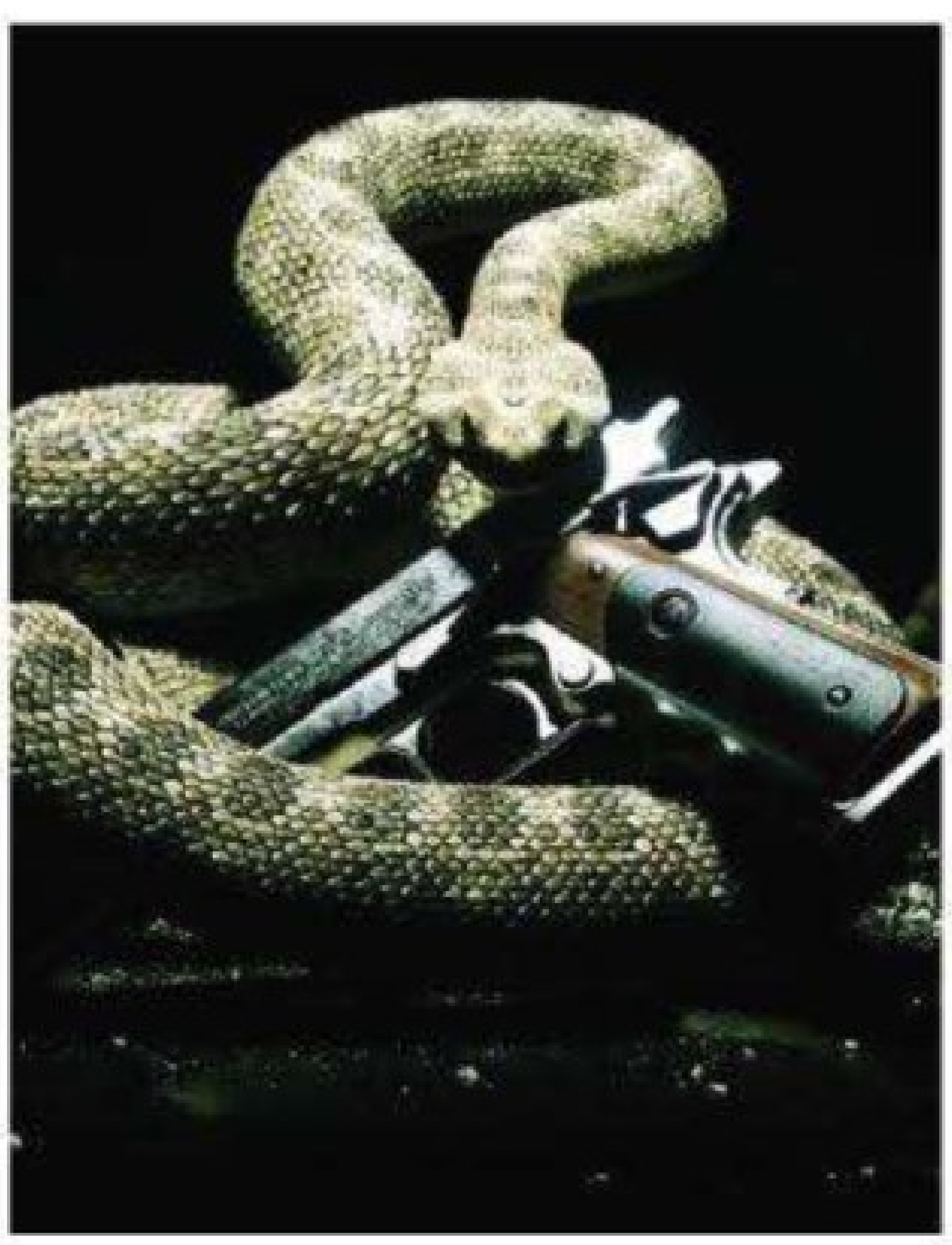
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Art showcase

"EVEN WITH YOUR BARE HANDS, YOU'RE SUPER-BRUTAL. ONE VERSUS ONE, YOU SHOULD NEVER BE AFRAID"

That's where our demo ends, but we suspect that's not it for the level. If that last checkpoint had a heavy disguise focus, does that mean that the bustling crowd which absorbed our assassin will play a part in the next one? IO has flirted with such technology before, of course – in both *Blood Money* and *Kane & Lynch*. "It's deliberately a tease at this point," says Blystad, smiling. "We're super-excited about this. It's one of the areas we've been working on most on the tech side. The ways we're using [the crowd] now will be very different."

Elverdam adds: "We have this family of stealth and it's part of that family – how you deal with crowds." At the moment, however, neither is willing to divulge more.

What we've seen shows an aggressive retooling of the *Hitman* formula – the presence of smaller sandboxes, a checkpoint structure, and the scripted action beats alone might well be enough to have some of the series' more hardcore fans reaching for the fibre wire. And the changes don't stop there.



Long-time series composer Jesper Kyd will not be working on *Absolution*, with IO instead working with Danish composer duo Peter Peter and Peter Kyed. "Kyd is a great composer and we will work with him again, I'm very sure," says Blystad, "but for this particular production it felt right to do something different." More radically still, David Bateson, 47's longtime voice artist – and, indeed, also the basis of his character model – will not return. At this stage, IO is unprepared to announce if a replacement actor has been cast, but we'd wager that, with Los Angeles-based performance-capture firm Giant Studios confirmed to be working on the production, and US actors Keith Carradine and Marsha Thomason confirmed to be part of the cast, another recognisable performer from film or TV seems likely.

For all the changes, *Absolution* is unmistakably a *Hitman* game – it retains the black humour, the freedom, and most importantly, it presents the player with situations which are as much puzzles to solve as they are challenges to overcome. And as fundamental as its changes appear, they're calculated to empower players in the process of making these moment-to-moment choices. "It was very controversial within the company," says Blystad, "going for a more checkpoint-based approach and scaling down some areas, but when we implemented it and had users coming in, it's been unanimously praised rather than hated. Everybody loves the fact that it's more contained, more forgiving. It's easier to improvise within sections rather than having to put your entire level progress at stake at any given time."

The *Hitman* series has always promised the chance to be Death in $20,000 suit, yet it forced players to learn the rules of its expansive and opaque sandboxes first. How well the new, tightly designed levels will work alongside the series' classic open-ended designs remains unclear, but, for those who never warmed to *Hitman*'s idiosyncrasies, *Absolution* may finally deliver the dark fantasy IO always promised. ■

CAT AND MICE


For an AI programmer, stealth can be a headache. Protagonists who can attack from anywhere, at any time, mean AI-controlled foes have to be able to react spontaneously to assaults, rather than making use of easily anticipated cover points and lines of sight. In previous *Hitman* games, enemies would swing erratically between acting like complete dolts and displaying terrifying omniscience – a botched kill could all too easily snowball into a bloodbath when guards who should be none the wiser would take it upon themselves to rush to the scene.

According to **Ulf Johansen** (above), lead AI programmer on *Absolution*, however, the realtime editing offered by IO's new Glacier 2 engine has made ironing out AI quirks easier than before. At his workstation, he fires up the demo we've just seen, before switching on an a whole suite of annotations in the engine – *Metal Gear Solid*-esque sight cones spring from enemies' heads, for instance, while individual NPCs' 'thought processes' appear in realtime on an adjacent screen. "Imagine you want to know something, like, 'why is this guy not searching?'" he explains, highlighting a guard who seems particularly uncaring about a gun battle erupting on the other side of the room – "Before, you'd [attempt a fix] and have to redo the level and wait ten minutes to see if it had any effect. Instead, we can just see it now."

But realtime editing has only been one improvement in the tech. "We've put in a system that coordinates the behaviour of the AI," he continues. "They actually understand what's going on with the other guys. That's something we couldn't do in *Blood Money*. We've also added a new component which we call the reasoning grid," he says, before switching on said grid, causing the dark and musty floor of the library to become covered in green squares. "The grid spreads across the level – we can calculate information such as visibility and assign it to points in this grid to help the AI do better spatial reasoning," he explains. As he speaks, 47 takes cover behind an empty shelf. The nearby area is covered in luminously bright squares which represent positions advantageous to the AI.

Johansen engages in a flowing battle among the library shelves 47 crept through when we were first shown the demo. As well as offering us a glimpse at an alternate approach to the checkpoint, the AI's intelligent use of cover suggests a game in which gunfights will be more tactically satisfying than ever before. "We have gone for what we'd call a hero-centric approach," says Blystad. "It will always centre on you – whatever you do, the AI will react to that dynamically."


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HERE BE DRAGONS

Format 360, PC, PS3
Publisher Bethesda Softworks
Developer Bethesda Game Studios
Release November 11

The mountain known as The Throat of the World stands before us. It fills our vision – snow-coated escarpments, fog-smothered peaks and black claws of rock so massive, so tall, that the eye cannot absorb it in one go. It looks fierce, deadly and cold – and just looking at it, even from the bucolic haven of the valley below, we can already imagine the hiss and wail of wind, the oppressive, driving ice that will greet us as we journey to its top. And we will go there – up its 7,000 steps, through its frigid passes and over treacherous gale-blown ridges. And when we reach the very peak, we will meet the Greybeards and from them learn the words of power – the language of dragons.

There is a sense that this is the moment that Bethesda's long-running open-world roleplaying series *The Elder Scrolls* has been building towards; both within its fiction – fulfilling the prophesy that the dragons will wake from their slumber and imperil the fantasy realm of Tamriel – and in the philosophy of its design. The preceding title, *Oblivion*, was primarily a game of mechanisms – its central plot left many cold and its narrative efforts were often hamstrung by torpid voicework and uncanny animation – but it rarely mattered in the context of the systems and simulations with which you could toy. Such systems have only become more elegant and powerful in this sequel, but now they are matched by an enhanced sense of craft to the world and the quests within it. *Skyrim*'s mountainous landscape feels authored, dramatically rich – it feels like it's there *for you*. *Oblivion* was simply vast; *Skyrim* feels epic.

Whichever race or gender you select during character creation, your role in *Skyrim* is assuredly a pivotal one – you are Dragon Born, a hero destined to do battle with the scaly monstrosities that have begun to emerge from the mountains in northernmost Tamriel. But your heroic destiny is not immediately within reach: as with *Oblivion* and *Morrowind* before it, *Skyrim* begins with the player clapped in irons for reasons left largely to the player's imagination. After escaping your execution – a section of the game Bethesda isn't willing to demonstrate just yet – you find yourself among the verdant valleys which nestle beneath The Throat of the World.

The vista's contrasts are arresting for two reasons. First, for its aesthetic – with the warmth and greenery of the immediate surroundings giving way to the ominous, cold shadow of the mountain – but the scene also illustrates the engine improvements that allow *Skyrim* to draw both the intricate flora in the foreground and the colossal geology that rises behind.

"We rewrote the entire renderer," says creative director **Todd Howard** as he moves the hero to examine a fern, bowing in a gentle breeze. "We have full shadows now. We rewrote the pathing, the AI systems, the quest systems, the dialogue, the interface and the animation system."

If Bethesda's other games have been criticised for the unnatural, jerky movements of their characters, then no longer – switching to thirdperson, Howard shows off the sinuous bulk of his hero, lumbering up inclines and across obstacles with a fluidity of movement and convincing sense of connection. Bethesda's intent, says Howard, is that *Skyrim* stands up alongside any other thirdperson game, should the player choose to use that viewing mode. Howard prefers firstperson, however – leaving the qualities of the thirdperson camera unproven in the sequence that follows.

An encounter with a foolhardy bandit does demonstrate *Skyrim*'s new dual wielding system, however. "We actually added dual wielding late," says Howard. "It wasn't in the original design, but it just felt so natural to do that – you can mix styles a lot."

Pressing the D-pad, Howard is able to quickly assign functions to both his left and right hands. The menu he brings up is a favourites list – but it's not much slower for him to dig into further layers of the menu to select magic spells, shields or swords. The UI designers have done a wondrous thing here, clean, black banners sliding across the screen for each tier of depth, with each item instantly viewable in 3D for closer inspection. Even spells are described visually, their particle effects sizzling within a colourful sphere of energy.

> "IF YOU PLAY IT FOR 20 HOURS, THOSE 20 HOURS ARE DIFFERENT TO SOMEONE ELSE'S"

Then, with a shield in one hand and a sword in the other, Howard prepares to defend himself. The left trigger controls his left hand, and the right trigger his right. Once again, the direction of movement modifies action, so that he can control the angle of his slashing blade. It's a violently kinetic battle, the collision of blade and shield more acutely felt than in *Oblivion*, shield barges creating Havok-enhanced stumbles and successful blows splashing your weapon with gore. Howard pulls back, selecting a healing spell in both hands to double its effect, a ball of energy fizzing between his outstretched fingers. Dissimilar spells currently cannot be directly combined, Howard tells us later, but there's nothing to stop you dual-wielding them – as he demonstrates by switching one healing spell out for frostbite, which slows and damages his opponent. Howard closes in, delivering an execution move – a flourish which activates depending on the convenient placement of the actors within a scene – which sees him grip his opponent by the neck and plunge a blade deep into his guts.

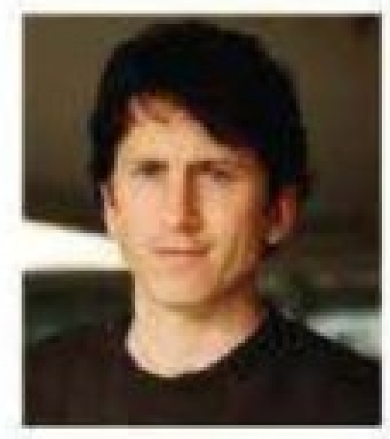
As the bandit's body crumples to the dirt, Howard takes advantage of the lull to show *Skyrim*'s revamped system of skills. *Oblivion* had at its core an intuitive mechanism – you got better at things by doing them. *Skyrim* carries this on, but strips out many of the elements which made the fine detail of *Oblivion*'s levelling opaque.

"In *Oblivion*, you had your eight attributes, then you had 21 skills," says Howard. "Now you have 18 skills and the three main attributes: magicka, health and stamina. What we found is that all of those eight attributes actually did something else. In *Oblivion*, you had to raise your intelligence, knowing that your intelligence would raise your magicka, to cast more spells. We found they all trickled down to some other stat. So we just got rid of it. Now when you [want to level up your magicka], you just raise your magicka."

Also gone are skills that Bethesda felt had no real value to roleplaying. Acrobatics and athletics are out, because such skills should be a given – as Howard says: who really wants to roleplay a character who can't run? Blessedly, this means that players will no longer have to spend the entire game jumping in order to more quickly propel these stats – although we will shed a tear for our beloved hero, Tubsy the

M Y T H M A K I N G

"There were definitely points in *Oblivion* where you rode the rollercoaster of pain, because the world levels up faster than you," says Howard (right). *Skyrim* takes *Fallout*'s approach, however, whereby the level of an area is set in stone the first time you enter it, allowing you to return when you are more powerful. A general rule of thumb, however, is that the farther into the mountains you go, the tougher things get. But you will rarely face an entirely impossible fight, as Howard explains: "We find that most players, even if they run into something hard and we think they should leave, will beat their head against that wall – because they are not a pussy. So we give the player a lot of devices to get through that – if they want to expend all their resources to get through that event, they can."



cat-man, and his game-breaking ability to leap out of *Oblivion*'s levels. Now, the relationship between skills and attributes is more transparent.

"Every skill affects your level," says Howard. "You'll notice every time I get a skill raise there's a level-up bar that moves, no matter what skill I'm using. So skills become like our XP – the higher the skill, the more it pushes your levelling. This allows you to change course; you can be level ten, and have focused on magic the whole time, and then find this great sword and start using that."



Meanwhile, a system of skill-specific perks (awarded at a rate of one per level) provides the granularity with which players impart distinct powers to their character. They offer dramatic advancement of an often very visible kind: archery perks, for example, might allow you to slow down time, or zoom as you take aim. The visualisation of the perk trees themselves is almost sublime – a succinct and beautiful display that takes the constellations as its inspiration. Each skill has its own astrological sign (an extension of the birth signs used to define your character in *Oblivion*), illuminating new stars within it as you select perks.

"I think the idea that you make your own character and that you can then do whatever you want in a really big game – that's *The Elder Scrolls*," says Howard after the demonstration. "It needs a certain size, not to make it hundreds of hours long, but so that you feel there's enough opportunity to do what you want. Even if you're gonna play it for 20 hours, those 20 hours are different to someone else's. I think that's kind of the hallmark."

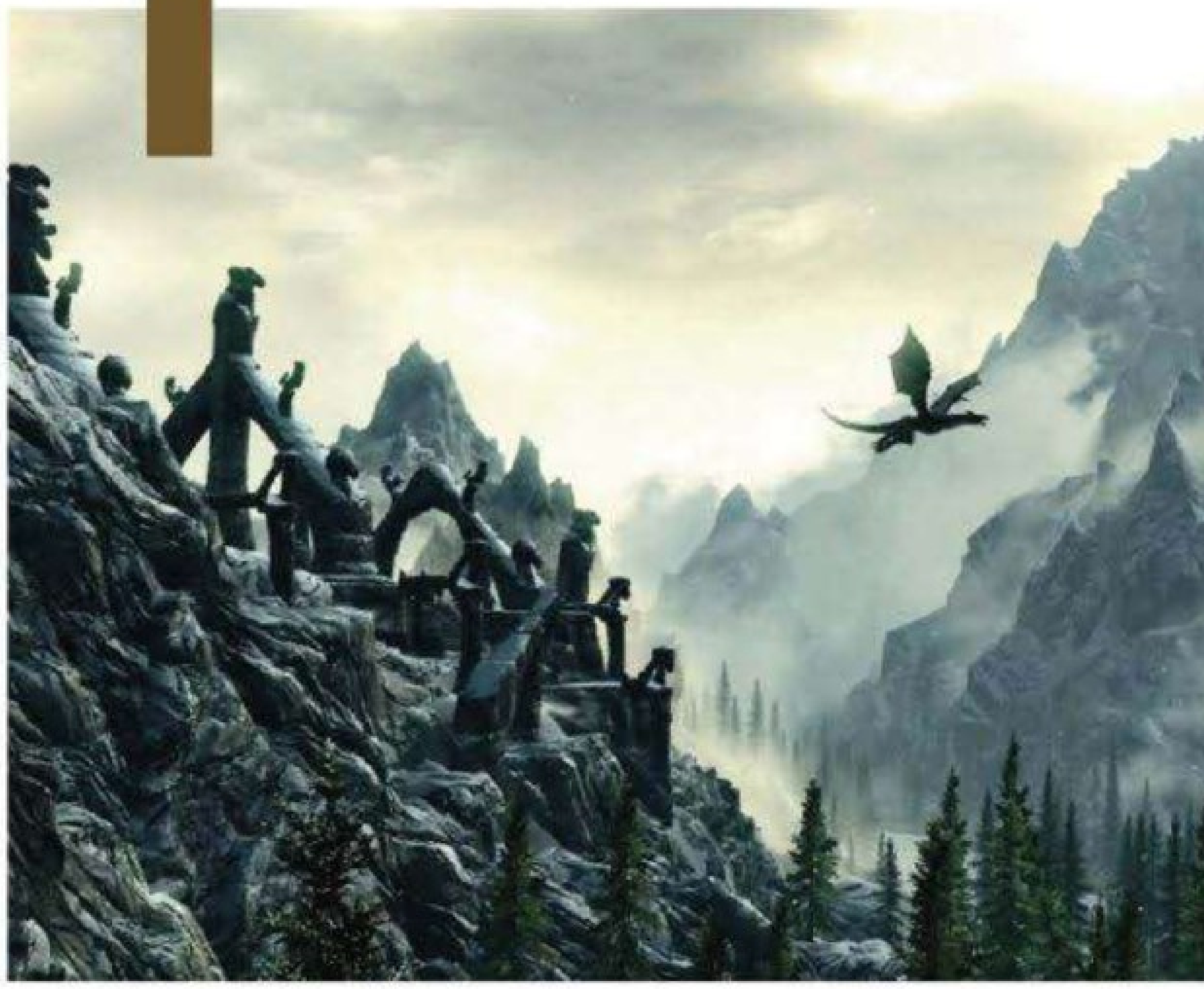
The freedom to define your character's abilities is matched by the freedom to choose where you go and what you do there. Although *Skyrim* offers an explorable area much the same size as *Oblivion*'s, its degree of simulation has been considerably expanded. Everything you see a character do, you can do as well, Howard explains, as he stands beside a lumber mill in the town of Riverwood, where a man is busily piling logs. These professions are part of a simulated economy, too. Sabotage the lumber mill and wooden items, like arrows, will become scarce. The degree to which the player will be able to plunge the province into financial crisis is yet undetermined, however.

"[Simulated economies are] always a good idea on paper," says Howard. "We have lumber mills there, we have mines and smelters for iron – that affects weapons. Then we have farms – that affects food and ingredients which then affect alchemy. We have all that working, but we haven't found the gameplay sweet spot. We're still messing with that."

Howard passes by the mill and talks to a local, who lets slip a bit of gossip about a burglary at a nearby shop. Pleasantly, and in a departure from Bethesda's RPGs thus far, talking to someone no longer forces the camera into a terrifying dolly-zoom towards their face. Conversations can now be left at any point, simply be the player tearing himself away from face-to-face contact. Less convincing are the advances in the dialogue itself: following the tip-off, Howard heads into the shop to overhear an argument between the shopkeeper and his sister about how to best chase down the perpetrators. It isn't a bravura performance, but nor is it quite as halting as *Oblivion*'s hammily staged dramatics.

"The actors have gotten better at it over time," says Howard. "They've done more videogames, and they understand this isn't a back-and-forth scene – this is: 'You're going to read a bunch of responses that could happen.' We're doing a lot more in Hollywood now, recording over there. Ultimately at the end of the day it's time and money, and we're spending more time and spending more money on it. It used to be an issue with disc space; on *Oblivion* we were literally running out of room on the disc for voice, and we've since solved that – there are better compression techniques. So we're not really limited by the physical media as much as how long it takes to record it. And the issue actually becomes... you know we're doing the games in five major languages? So the amount of time it takes to record in English and French and German and Italian and Spanish – it's a pretty major undertaking."

Part of *Oblivion*'s problem was that the staging of the dialogue within such a reactive, dynamic world didn't always produce believable interactions – and that may be occasionally true here, too. As the shopkeeper's sister leads us through town, telling us about the claw-shaped heirloom the thieves took before making off to Bleakfalls Barrow, other citizens bark their greetings, sometimes making it difficult to hear what she says.



RIGHT *Skyrim*'s terrain is broken up into nine Holds, each governed by its own Jarl. Within these there are five big cities, each given their own distinct aesthetic flavour



ABOVE The faces are improved over previous games' uncanny potato-men – but with Radiant AI putting together stories on the fly, will the generic dialogue convince? "We've found ways to write things so you don't have holes," says Howard, then conceding: "but that has been really tricky"

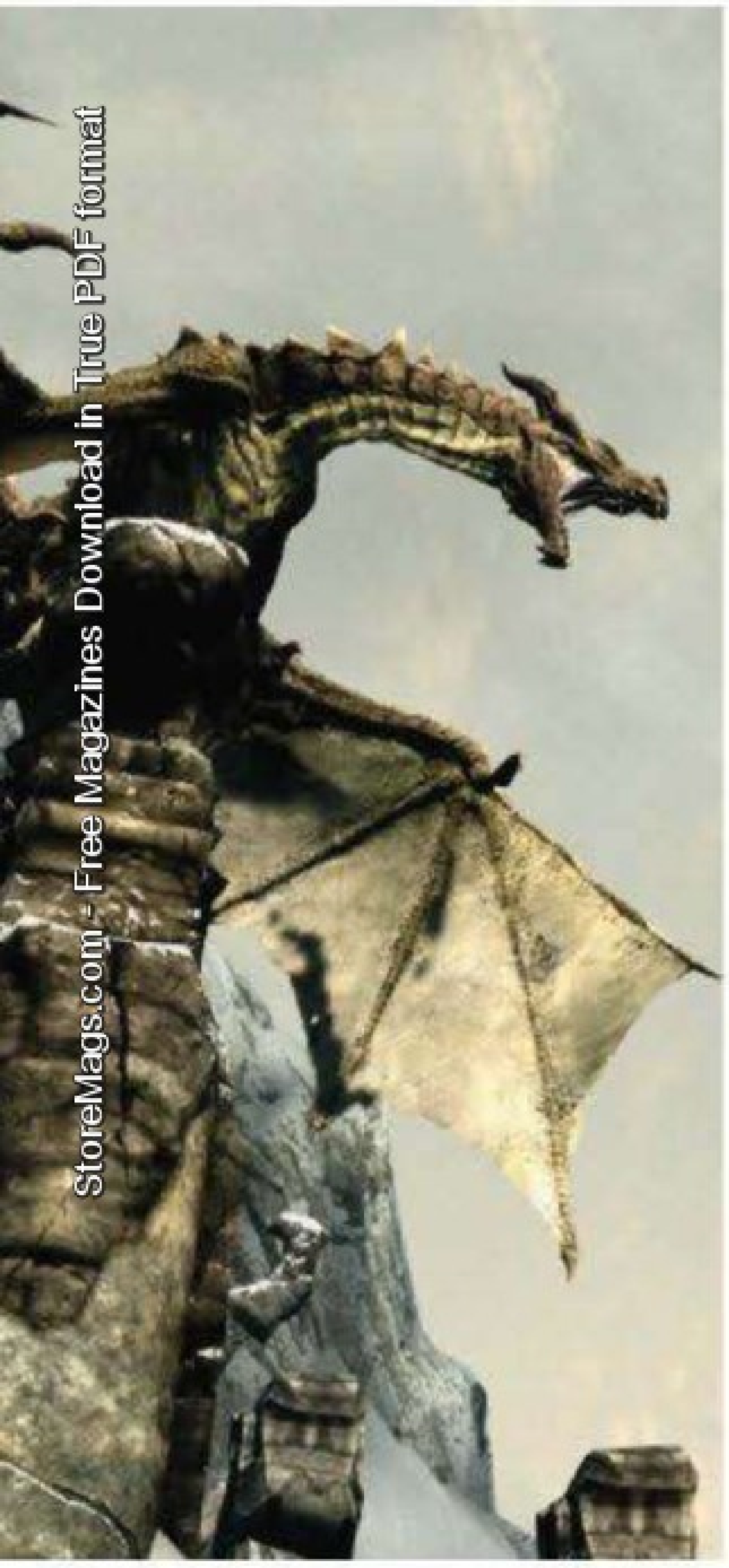




ABOVE Some unexpected feedback from players has been the demand for fulsome hunting options, and *Skyrim*'s world has an ecology to support that. "We have wolves that will go out and hunt," says Howard, describing its food chain. "If they hunt a mammoth and kill it, they will hang out by it for a while, and then they go back on their route"







BELOW Our demonstration sees the player stalking through Skyrim on foot – the jury's out on mounts, apparently. "We want to make sure they're a gameplay addition," says Howard. "Horses have come a long way in games. It's looking good right now, but we may yank them"



LEFT As Howard says, combat is debate for dragons: their language itself is the source of their power – and the player's too, as you begin to learn Shouts. They're comprised of three words, learned separately and uttered in order as you hold down the button, the power increasing with each word

IT'S A VIOLENTLY KINETIC BATTLE, THE COLLISION OF BLADE AND SHIELD ACUTELY FELT

Regardless of its momentary lapses of credibility, the scale and sophistication of *Skyrim*'s simulation manages to fill the gaps. As Howard heads into the mountains in pursuit of the thieves, a giant saunters past – many creatures have their own business to attend to as bit-players in the world's ecology, and have no interest in attacking you. This is not true of the troll we next encounter, however, which Howard quickly immolates and hacks down, or indeed the two orc sentries, guarding a watchtower just above the snow-line. Howard shows off some Alteration magic, casting a spell on one which causes it to attack its counterpart, before finishing off the remaining guard with a bow.

Howard hikes on, the (procedurally rendered) snow now lying thick upon the rocks around him. Finally he reaches a plateau, flanked by columns of stone that resemble a rib cage; at the far end lie the doors to the barrow. But Howard is not alone – the sound of leathery wings alerts us to the presence of a dragon, which circles the area. Howard makes a dash for the barrow entrance, but the beast swoops, landing heavily on the steps between him and safety, disgorging a shriek of flame.

"Ah, shit," mutters Howard. Though meeting a dragon here is inevitable, the encounter isn't playing out to any script. Dragons act as dynamic boss battles, deployed at specific moments in the story or randomised, helping to draw players back to the central quest.

"We can time how long it was since you saw a dragon, track your level and what you're doing – maybe it's time to bring on a dragon!" says Howard later, explaining how the Radiant AI story system orchestrates such encounters. "One of the designers put in this random encounter where three dragons swoop by this town. It [was intended to be] just a visual – but they think on their own. They saw me and it was party time. I was like: 'Who did this?!' But then I thought I'd try to make it work – I ran into the mountains to try and lose them. And I'd lose them every once in a while. It felt like in The Two Towers when Frodo's going through the swamp – I've never felt like that in a game. It was really terrifying. Though I did make the designer take it out. Three dragons is too many."

"WE CAN TRACK YOUR LEVEL AND WHAT YOU'RE DOING – MAYBE IT'S TIME TO BRING ON A DRAGON!"

One dragon does indeed seem plenty enough trouble – Howard just managing to dodge around the creature and through the doors to the safety of the barrow and its loading screen. Inside, it is dark, the cavernous entrance lit only by a flicker at the far end, illuminating structures of stone that feel quite apart from the daedric shrines and fantasy milieu of *Oblivion*. This is the land of the Nords – the first men – and their architecture is assuredly driven by Viking influence. It feels earthy, austere and, most importantly, different from the other dungeons you might enter.

"The paradigm for how we build our worlds has not changed since *Terminator: Future Shock*," says Howard, describing how Bethesda builds its scenes from prefabricated kits. "We've just got better at it, making them more organic, adding a lot more pieces. It makes for good mods as well. We have multiple types of cave in the game, ones that are overgrown with moss and foliage, and then we have ice caves – like a dungeon inside a glacier. Then we have imperial forts. So we have five or six kits and within those kits a lot of variance. In *Oblivion* our art staff built the dungeons and we only had one or two guys who were your classic level designers. They played fine, but they didn't have individual impact. So we built up our level design staff, and at last count we have 120 or so dungeons, and then we have another 100-plus points of interest – outside encounters. But you're going to get puzzles, different-looking environments and good flow. We're trying to stay away from the maze stuff."

Farther into the dungeon we see how running water, bubbling over the moss and rocks of the barrow's floor, is used to direct the player's eye. Here at the entrance, it is the flickering torches which draw the player in, and as Howard creeps past the stone pillars that prop up the rock above, he eavesdrops on two thieves, standing by the fire, discussing the fate of their colleagues who have ventured deeper into the barrow.

"*Fallout 3* had multiple states of alert and danger," says Howard as he sneaks closer, drawing his bow. "We have those states, but they don't jump in and out of them right away. The Eye symbol [replacing the reticule as in *Oblivion*] is showing you that they're moving from one state to another, and your sneak skill affects how fast. We give you time to adjust to the fact that the thing you're doing is wrong, to realise you're moving into the light."

Howard skewers one of the thieves through the neck with an arrow. His partner turns and draws her sword. "I'm sure I heard something," she says ruminatively. Howard quickly puts an end to her curiosity and descends a winding corridor, dispatching a third thief along the way with some frantic close-quarters archery.

Had Howard not killed him, however, the thief would have found no happier fate – instead being butchered by a booby-trapped puzzle in the following chamber, giving the player a hint as to how not to solve it. It's a simple symbol-matching puzzle, rotating blocks to match those depicted elsewhere, but it is proof that Bethesda is attempting to seed its dungeons with greater personality and variety beyond their monsters.

There are plenty of those monsters, of course – in this case the Draugr, undead Nord warriors, who slink from their berths in the catacomb walls in a most unseemly manner. Howard's

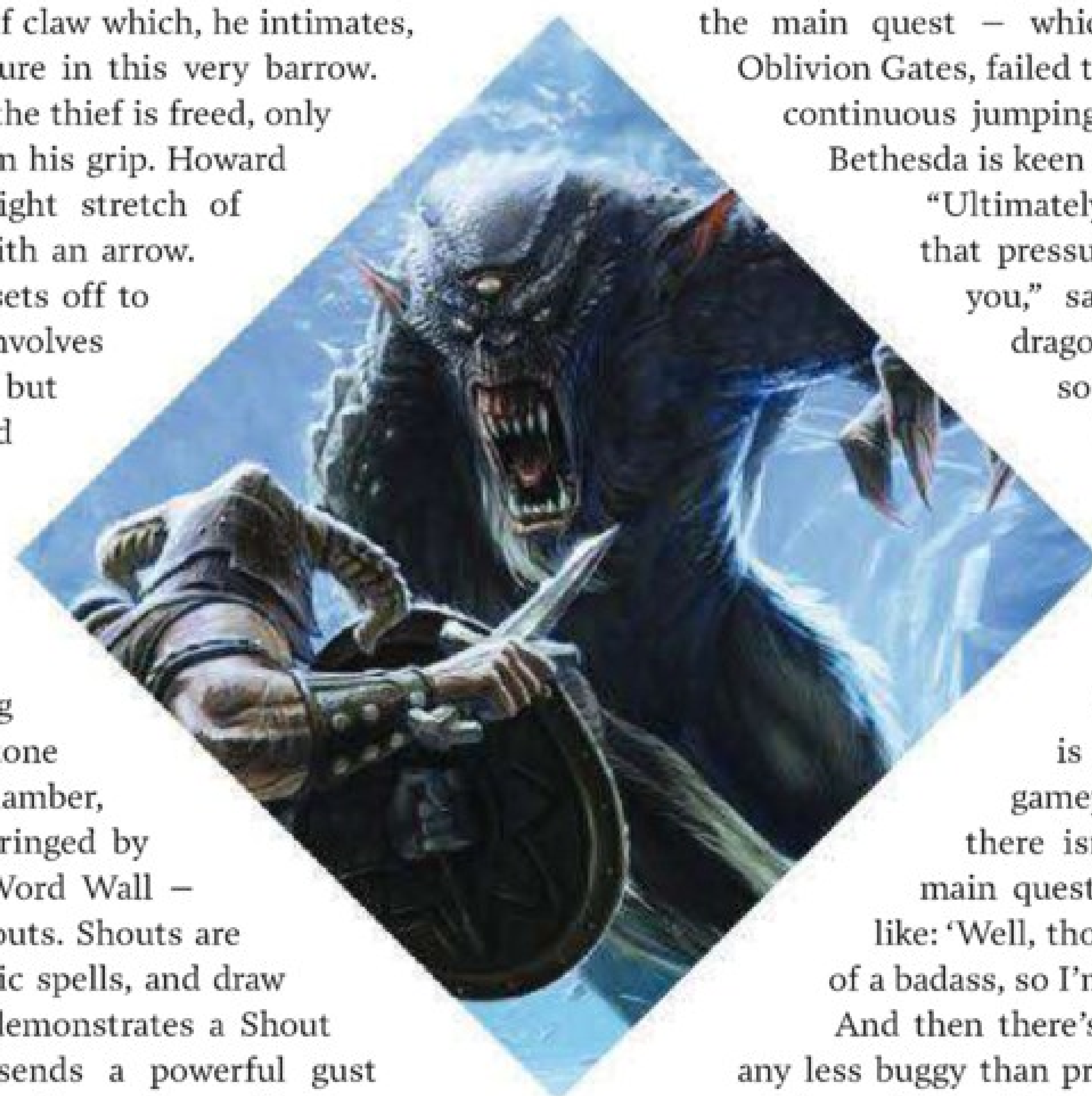
R A D I A N T   A S   A L W A Y S

The Radiant AI system which governs the quests and events returns in enhanced form.

Howard explains: "In *Oblivion* or *Fallout 3*, you'd go into town and you'd pick up a quest where a guy's kid has been taken by bandits to a dungeon. We know the guy, we know the dungeon, we know the kid. [In *Skyrim*] when we write that quest, the designer can write all the dialogue, and he can fill out the parameters. He can say who was taken – this specific character, or just say it's a child of somebody in town. So the game finds a guy in town who has a child, and sends the child to a dungeon nearby that you didn't go to. So now we can channel you a little bit. It's one of the things we really struggle with: control. We have a big playground – and certain players go, 'Great!' – but there are still a lot of players who it goes poorly for; they don't have the experience that they want. And this allows us to control that some."

solution to the Draugr menace is to discourage them with a circle of protection spell and then fry them with chain lightning, eventually switching to dual-wielding lightning to deliver an almighty shock. Others meet their end enveloped in a fireball, or tossed off a precipice by the blast. A giant spider, meanwhile, is dispatched by an ice rune – a magical trap which explodes in an icy cloud to slow and damage its prey.

It transpires the spider had been keeping Arvel the Swift, the final remaining thief, as a snack, trussed up in a nearby doorway. In a weedling, unusually characterful voice, he beseeches the player to cut him down, claiming he'll give up the heirloom he stole – some sort of claw which, he intimates, can be used to open a secret treasure in this very barrow. Howard slashes at the webbing and the thief is freed, only to dash off cackling, the prize still in his grip. Howard gives chase, and at the first straight stretch of dungeon plugs Arvel in the back with an arrow. Claiming the golden claw, Howard sets off to prove Arvel's theory, which involves another symbol-matching puzzle, but this time the solution is engraved upon the claw itself, forcing the player to examine it in the inventory, rotating it until the inscription is visible.



With the symbols matched, the claw acts as a key, allowing Howard access to a precipitous stone staircase and into a large chamber, punctuated by shafts of light and ringed by waterfalls. At its centre stands a Word Wall – from which the player can learn Shouts. Shouts are a supplement to your standard magic spells, and draw from a separate resource. Howard demonstrates a Shout called Unrelenting Force, which sends a powerful gust shimmering through the air which will stagger or blow over enemies. This particular Word Wall teaches him another Shout which slows time. We soon see it in action: assaulted by a dragon priest and his ice golem buddy, Howard uses the Shout to buy him valuable seconds in which to deal damage.

Having taken care of the priest, however, Howard must still face his master – outside, the dragon that harried our ascent to the barrow is still to be seen, circling in the sky. Howard shoots a fireball across the dragon's flightpath to get its attention. The battle is protracted – thrilling – with the dragon soaring and swooping above, as Howard slings a flurry of fireballs to bring it down. As the dragon lands, preparing to unleash a barrage of flame, Howard slows time and strafes, dealing brutish melee attacks with a mace. The dragon takes off again, but Howard fries it with lightning and its body crashes to the ground, skidding and crumpling under its own momentum. Its corpse disintegrates into embers as Howard devours its soul – such is the privilege of the Dragon Born.

The demonstration has lasted an hour, or thereabouts. If our time with *Oblivion* is anything to go by, this represents something like a 200th of the overall game experience. Needless to say, very few of those hours were spent pursuing the main quest – which, with its grindsome, repetitious Oblivion Gates, failed to compete with all the sidequests and continuous jumping that was otherwise available to us. Bethesda is keen not to make the same mistake again.

"Ultimately, we still need to write a good story that pressures you into doing it, that intrigues you," says Howard. "The nice thing with dragons is that we can move them around, so we can have the main story hit you wherever you are. What we don't want to do is gate it, like, 'Well, you can't progress in the game at all until you've done this thing.' Learning the Shouts really ties into the main quest, so now you instantly see that not only is there a story reason, there is a power gameplay reason. In *Oblivion* and *Fallout* there isn't really a power reason to do the main quest. Well, here with the Shouts you're like: 'Well, those are fun, I'm going to become more of a badass, so I'm going to do this questline.'"


And then there's the other killer question: will it be any less buggy than previous efforts? "I think we're getting much better," says Howard. "*Fallout 3*, compared to *Oblivion*, was a lot less buggy – we learnt a lot on how to test that. There are some things that you simply are surprised by, that you can't test for, because people can do so many things. But we've found there's a lot of things we can test for that we should have tested for before. So I have no doubt we're going to be much better."

Bugs or not, however, it's clear that Bethesda's games have an attraction which makes many of their surface flaws irrelevant – a dynamic and deep world, seeded with dramatic, elaborate and varied stories, with potent combat mechanisms that are easily personalised, mixed and matched. In all of these respects *Skyrim* may just excite more than any other game this year. If all that is prophesied comes true, Bethesda may have wrought a game to go down in legend. ■

F L A S H F O R W A R D

How will games have evolved in ten years' time? How will you be playing them? We ask the big questions to some big thinkers, and find out why the future might not be televised





GEORDI LA… FUTURE?

Visors could be the key to the future of not just gaming, but shopping, socialising and managing your emails. But don't pronounce your current LED TV dead just yet; Gaikai's David Perry sees a strong future for more traditional displays, albeit with a next-gen twist. Perry outlines what he refers to as "multi-channel stereoscopic 4K [4,096 pixels wide] video," in which a scene is recorded from numerous positions and camera setups, with all the data then stored on a disc. Audiences can then view the recorded film from various angles simply by tilting their head (investigating behind an onscreen object, for example) thanks to an advanced form of Kinect's motion tracking. Visors and multi-channel media are the types of technology that could be reality very soon.

At the turn of the millennium, N64 controller in hand, could any of us have predicted motion control by the end of the decade? How about glasses-free 3D in the palms of our hands? If recent developments in the videogame industry tell us anything, it's that news of the Next Big Thing could very well leak via Twitter before you've finished reading this article. Furthermore, the average consumer has no concept of what that 'thing' will be. A unified platform? Cloud-based gaming? 3D phones? Holographic 3D? There are a lot of eggs filling a lot of expensive R&D baskets. The past decade has arguably seen the most rapid rate of technological advancement in gaming history, and where the next decade will lead is a question mark of skyscraping proportions.

Futurologists such as **Ian Pearson** make a living out of answering impossible questions. Formerly employed by BT as the company's futurologist, a post he held for 15 years, Pearson now works for 'future technology, market and strategy consultant' Futurizon, offering advice on what the future may hold and how to prepare for it. He also has some strong opinions on videogames' role in shaping the next decade's technology: "What we're going to see really is an integration of computer games into every aspect of our everyday life – I've often said that computer game technology is really the focal point for future convergence."

Convergence of the real and virtual worlds is something explored most famously in the work of author – and father of the term 'cyberspace' – **William Gibson**. "I think that the distinction we now insist on drawing between the two will eventually seem quaint and arbitrary," he tells us.

While we have seemingly never had more TV screens in our homes or computing power in our pockets, Pearson's vision is of a screen-free, augmented future. He believes a general-purpose heads-up display, delivered via visor, will be the standard means of delivery for future media. "The question is, can you get a visor which you can wear all day, which is comfortable enough, which doesn't give you eye problems and which is semi-transparent enough or which you can fade in and out with the real world? I think yes, you can with all of those. Somebody – it might even be Apple, who knows? – will come out with the next-generation display which will make an awful lot of the displays we have obsolete."

Crytek's principal graphics engineer, **Tiago Sousa**, backs up Pearson's assertion with a similar prediction: "A really comfortable, almost weightless and relatively cheap device has a good chance to become successful – I can't see myself playing with usual VR displays for too long, but if it would have the same weight as current 3D polarised glasses it would definitely become successful."

Not only does Pearson believe visors will be the next decade's pivotal piece of tech, he's convinced they're also just around the corner. "We will see the augmented reality visors coming out in the next 18 months to two years, and they'll become very popular on the high street," he says. "And that probably will be the default way of doing augmented reality; we'll sort of throw away our iPhones and iPads to some degree, because you don't need those once you've got a decent heads-up display. If we're seeing the first ones appearing in the next 18 months to two years with reasonable quality and semi-transparent [displays] so you can use them walking down the high street, if we've got those, then give it another two, three years after that and I would say they'd have taken the market by storm, the whole of the game industry will be using that, so say by 2015 I think most gaming will be based on visors and the sort." A revolution in four years sounds optimistic, yet, in the current climate of mass experimentation by hardware developers and consumers – from gesture and voice recognition to forward-thinking Kinect hacks that attempt to further medical research – is it really so hard to imagine? On the issue of media storage and transmission, Pearson suggests jewellery, such as earrings or necklaces, will provide the most obvious portable option.

"What we're going to see really is an integration of computer games into every aspect of everyday life"

It sounds like science fiction (see '2020 visions'), and modern writers like **Alastair Reynolds**, famed for futuristic space operas that deal in nanotechnology and fractured cultures, share a similar vision: "I think, generally speaking, not just in gaming, we'll see more and more application of augmented reality," he says. "That kind of trend will continue until we reach the seamless integration of the real world and the augmented world, and the technology will be increasingly less clunky."

Oddly it's Reynolds, who works in the realm of fiction as opposed to Pearson's world of projected fact, who is the most conservative regarding how quickly the change will arrive. "One of the problems with predicting the future is you tend to overestimate change on a short-term timescale. I remember reading an article from 2000 speculating on what the average home PC of the year 2010 would be like and it was wildly inaccurate. Ten years is not that long in terms of some sort of development timescale." He does, however, subscribe to the theory that screen-based interfacing is destined to become a forgotten relic: "As a science-fiction writer you're often in a position where someone has to interface with some sort of computing system. I've just written a book [Blue Remembered Earth] set 150 years in the future and what I tried to do throughout the book was at no point have a screen of any kind. I think screens at some point will be on their way out – I don't know if that's in ten years or 50 years. Throughout the book there's no physical computer hardware at any point, it's all sort of cloudware, it's just out there. People interface with this augmented reality layer via implants and visors, if you like; there are no keyboards or screens. I can't see screens lasting forever and ever. It goes back to that point, though, that technology does tend to stick around a bit longer than people expect."

Fellow science-fiction author **Richard K Morgan**, the writer behind *Crysis 2*, casts a sceptical eye over both visor-based gaming and the extent to which augmented reality will factor in

the coming years. "As a science-fiction author and a human being I'm not convinced by this direct-to-retina model. I'm 45 and I've just started to need reading glasses and you've no idea how much that pisses me off and the extent to which it annoys me having to put the bloody things on," says Morgan. "If you're a serious gamer you're probably capable of spending three, four, five hours playing, and I don't think anyone wants to sit for five hours with a great big thing wrapped around their face. I don't think it's that the technology isn't there or can't be done, it's whether or not people want it."

If he's proven wrong, however, and visors indeed become the next phase in displaying games and media, where does that leave contemporary controller hardware? Is gesture recognition the future? "You can't do everything just by waving your hands around," says Pearson. "The same goes for a keyboard and, yes, you can do an awful lot using voice recognition, but sometimes that doesn't work and you'll still want to type something. We'll probably still be using some sort of keyboard, even if it's a virtual keyboard hanging in space in front of you, and you're using gesture recognition to figure out where your fingertips are going. Those sorts of interfaces are very hard to engineer around – it's not just that they're primitive, it's that they give you so much extra functionality, it's hard to do that any other way."

Though the control schemes of the future are clearly up for debate, there's an ethical discussion to be had regarding ARGs exploding into the public sphere. For example, a disproportionate number of contemporary games seem to focus on warfare, conflict and battle. If some of today's subject matter were combined with the technology of tomorrow, Morgan argues it might be a very dangerous world indeed: "It's the human element that's the limiter here – and the question of do we really want that? To what extent do we want to allow games to spill out on to our streets? You can have very cerebral games, but if you look at the broad spectrum of games that exist there's an awful lot of killing in them. I think the first of these [AR visor] games that you see will revolve around real-world assassination-by-laser or Laser Quest-type dynamics."

Gibson puts the ethics of technological progress firmly into context: "Most technology is morally neutral until we use it for something, and what we'll use it for tends to be rather unpredictable. It isn't as though we have some choice that would allow us to shut off the tap from which technologies emerge. I'm really not in the business of prediction, and never have been. I try to reflect what's happening now, in ways that may make it easier to apprehend as it happens. Given the rate of technological emergence, now, that tends to look futuristic."

When proposing the extinction of screens, however, we must also pay heed to the potential environmental impact of such a shift. "If you've got a tiny little headset on, you can throw away dozens of other displays around the home; you need far fewer resources," says Pearson. "That's what always makes me sick about all these companies who want to slow down IT because of rapid obsolescence. If it wasn't for rapid obsolescence you wouldn't get to these points where you're making zero impact on the environment and having a fantastic lifestyle. Obsolescence is a very key weapon in protecting the environment."

"It's the most exciting time for the game industry since home consoles emerged in the late '70s"

While the hardware platforms we play on may change dramatically from those we currently use, experts predict the new age of free-to-play gaming ushered in this past decade will not only stick around but escalate rapidly. The recently formed company GamesAnalytics offers data-mining and monetisation consultation to online- and social-game publishers. **Alan Miller**, director of GA's North American operations and a co-founder of Activision, suggests that today's changing winds reliably indicate where things are moving in the space. "I think it's the most exciting time for the game industry since home consoles emerged in the late '70s," he says. "So many important aspects of the game industry are radically changing right now. The single most important trend is that games are being digitally delivered. This has had, and will continue to have, tremendous positive ramifications for games. It will continue, and in ten years the vast majority of games will be available anywhere and everywhere on a wide variety of devices via high-speed wireless. But this is much more than just a change from games being sold at a store to electronic delivery. The ramifications are enormous in terms of new audiences, new viable genres, new monetisation methods and the new ability to make use of the social connectedness provided by Facebook and others. I think in ten years more than half of the world's population will play games on a near-daily basis. And the worldwide annual revenue from games will be in excess of $100 billion."

An exclusively digital retail model would mean a jarring shake-up for companies currently thriving on physical sales. **Phil Harrison**, co-founder of investment firm London Venture Partners and former president of worldwide studios at Sony Computer Entertainment, suggests that the industry of the future might be one designed in California: "At this trajectory, if you extrapolate the market-share gains that they are making forward for ten years – if they carry on unrestrained in their growth – then there's a pretty good chance that Apple will be the games industry." Harrison's reasons for this prediction are twofold: "Firstly, the proliferation of devices – you've got iPhones, iPads, iPods, which are all part of the same ecosystem. The speed at which Apple sold 15 million iPads is phenomenal. And the number one activity on an iPad, according to some reports, is games, and I think that will only continue.

"[Secondly] the fact that the consumer purchase and discovery mechanism is so well integrated – you see something on the App Store, you click a button and the product delivers to your device. That end-to-end shopping experience, if you want to call it that, has been so elegantly built by Apple, and they will continue to refine it.

"Apple, Amazon, Steam are showing the future of how content will be consumed; add to that list the likes of NetFlix and



PORTABLE PROBLEMS

Co-founder and CEO of GamesAnalytics **Chris Wright** on present and upcoming gaming platforms: "The future is no more mobile than PC or TV. What is interesting is people are finding new ways of playing games on new devices. The iPad is a completely new form factor and you use it in a different way to an iPhone. Each of these devices is different and the games that work on them are different; the problem is when publishers simply try and put the same game on every device and wonder why it doesn't work. This is why the PSP never worked and why the NGP will also be a failure, because all you got was poor versions of games designed to be played on a big screen."

2020 VISIONS

Futurologist Ian Pearson on active contact lenses: "The idea goes way back to 1991. I concluded that with Moore's law applied to lasers, eventually you'd be able to get all the circuitry in a contact lens to produce the images straight on to your retina. We knew it would be a long way off, but three years ago the University Of Washington did the first prototype of an active contact lens. They used one LED per pixel, which is a very easy way to do it, in some respects. If you think about the ongoing developments with projectors, they started off as an LCD screen that you shine powerful light through, and now they use micro-mirrors with laser beams. If you take that view – of using a tiny laser beam with micro-mirrors for the active contact lens – then you'll only need three lasers and one micro-mirror in the centre of a lens which can wrap the scan, the laser beam, straight on to your retina. That would give you, potentially, a very high resolution image; there's no reason it shouldn't be as high as your retina can cope with. It could be completely 3D because you have one [contact lens] in each eye, so you've got totally different images, and because of the way it's stuck just on the outside of your cornea – and the way you can adjust the focusing – there's no reason you can't get the full depth of field. That's one of the faults with watching 3D TV or movies – you've only got one depth of field, and the director decides what that's going to be. It's important for it to feel natural, that you can actually focus your eyes through the depth of field, which you can't do with a film. Where it comes into its own is that it would be a general-purpose computer display, so you'd also be using that for reading your text messages and your emails and your Facebook accounts, all through the day as you're walking through town, as you're meeting people."



LoveFilm, and console companies run the risk of becoming a little antiquated unless they change their business model."

So how might the videogame marketplace look in this all-digital future? Will today's publishing giants still be kings? "I think new leaders can emerge because the economic factors are different," says Harrison. "One of the strengths that EA has at the moment is its physical distribution, retail relationships with tens of thousands of retailers around the world, and a very efficient distribution mechanism for getting boxes into those stores. But as time goes on, that will become less of a competitive advantage. As the power of retailers decreases proportionate to the whole industry, the strength of the physical distribution force wielded by companies like EA – or to a certain extent Activision, Microsoft, Sony, Nintendo – that power starts to be diluted a little bit."

Cloud-based services have been building momentum for a few years now, with US-based OnLive being among the first to bring the concept to the masses. Game industry veteran **David Perry** has also pioneered a new type of digital distribution with his Gaikai service and he, perhaps unsurprisingly, sees the future driven by the new level of convenience that the cloud affords: "You have to position yourself as a gamer and ask: 'What would you like?' I think one of the things that we've realised in the world, finally, is that convenience is one of the most valuable things that exists. To the point that it's actually quite surprising how disruptive convenience is to industries. While I was buying mountains of CDs, the CD industry was off designing new CDs, higher density and fidelity so they'd sound even better. But the whole industry took this whole disruptive turn to the left and went to MP3s which were much more convenient but not as high quality. So in quality versus convenience, convenience wins there, which is stunning."

From a game development perspective, however, Sousa identifies the hurdles in current cloud technology: "Until input lag is reduced significantly, I can only see cloud-based gaming as a way to quickly advertise a game, like for example try out a demo quickly with no time spent on downloads." Regardless, he's in favour of the solution it may provide to multiplatform development: "Moving forward into the future, having only one unique platform to develop for would be a dream from a developer perspective and the most efficient way to create a videogame – no need to spend time debugging or implementing code on this or that platform, optimising this or that platform, using certain tools on platform X and another set of tools on platform Y, multiply that with compiling code on platform Z or W. This would save a lot of time and effort and speed up the game-development process significantly."

Perry rules out Pearson's suggestion that jewellery may be the future means of portable storage for data, on grounds of it being "a power-supply problem every time." Harrison agrees that power is a big issue facing advances in portable tech: "There's a very clear technological improvement path for silicon chips but there isn't one for batteries, unfortunately. There is no silver bullet for solving the increasing chemical efficiency of batteries and this will always be a problem and will hold back the absolute potential for mobile devices until there is a breakthrough.

"I think the idea of local storage is completely going to go away. This is all going to be stored on the cloud – whether it's your photos, address book, videos. All of your personal data is going to be on the cloud and accessible from any device. I'm talking 20 years out, the notion of hard drives in our homes storing tons and tons of data is going to become a bit of joke. In exactly the same way that when electricity was first invented, large homes and factories in the UK all had their own power supply. Power generation was incredibly local. Then of course we moved from AC power to DC power. Then you had the national grid. The same thing will happen with cloud computing. We won't own physical hardware any more for storage."

If Pearson's augmented future is to be taken as gospel, with the cloud the primary means of access, storage and distribution, then it's fitting that flowing data should be socially connected. But the visor scenario perhaps makes more sense for an increasingly mobile society than it does a sedentary one. While it will likely be possible to share cinema and games on synchronised visors, it's hard to imagine an all-out extinction of big, communal screens. Morgan suggests 'pods' or dedicated rooms for a shared media experience, while Perry outlines 4K resolution screens [see 'Geordi La... Future?']. Gibson, too, recognises the importance of the social factor in today's, and therefore tomorrow's, world: "I think Facebook and Twitter are contemporary manifestations of something fully as profound as the advent of cities. Though really it's all part of the same ongoing species-wide programme."

"I think Facebook and Twitter are manifestations of something fully as profound as the advent of cities"

The advent of social games has had widespread ramifications for present-day production methods and game-development studio size, with companies like EA and Capcom restructuring to accommodate the new wave of connected, bite-sized titles. Morgan believes the fragmentation of the industry may extend into a contract culture for industry talent: "I imagine it might start to look like the publishing industry, where a publisher will sign you up for two, three, or in the case of some lucky guys they'll sign you for a ten-book deal."

Harrision sees a potentially strong future for user-generated content, something that could play a role in this new 'contract age' if the hurdle of monetisation can be conquered: "Today, user-generated content hasn't really figured out – in games, at least – how to be monetised. There are lots of good ideas but there's no one product or service that has really nailed the monetisation of UGC for a massmarket audience. And that will happen, I think that's the next major milestone for our industry to solve or overcome. Where you and I, as friends in the same social group, could combine forces to build a level, character, quest or experience that is then enjoyed by other players, and you and I gain some monetary value from that."

As for what games we'll actually be playing, Harrison

GAME OF LIFE

The concept of 'gamifying' health against your peers, privately or publicly, isn't a far cry from the current fitness game trend. Phil Harrison sees this draw on the political, social and technological spheres: "I think you'll see a lot of governments push this, and that will lead to fantastic business in games. Governments are really worrying about the impact of an ageing population. At the moment – in the developed countries of the west, in particular – we've got a shrinking teenage population and a growing retired population. So if governments see any technology which is going to help people be healthier for longer and therefore less reliant on the nation's resources to keep and feed them, that's a good thing."



WEAR NEXT

According to experts we've interviewed, the technological paradigms of the future will likely be pioneered by the developing world, mainly due to less stringent regulation in those regions. There is less consensus, however, around what form the ever-shrinking devices that house the data we own and interact with will assume. The idea that transmitters/receivers and data-storage devices will eventually merge with wearable fashion – in the form of jewellery, for example – seems a natural extension of current USB storage devices, and fits seamlessly with Pearson's vision of convergence between the real and virtual worlds.

bit.ly/jpWS9D
Full interview with Phil Harrison

seems to have the clearest vision of what software will line our virtual shelves: "The idea of a singleplayer, story-driven game I think is going to become rarer and rarer and more expensive to produce. That doesn't mean it goes away completely, just that there'd be fewer of them. I think that all games are going to be reliant on some type of social network for their mechanism of discovery. What I mean by that is, if you and I are in the same social group I will likely discover a game through you or one you're playing or vice versa. That doesn't mean that all games will need to be multiplayer intrinsically in their meta-gameplay, but the fact I'm playing a game and can be ranked against friends is very powerful, and I think will continue."

The fact that smaller development teams, achieving success with lower-stakes investment, have managed to make big, established companies envious enough to change their infrastructures is perhaps a precursor to the changes of the next ten years, and how they might come from the unlikeliest of places. In his upcoming book, Reynolds addresses this very issue. "It's one of the big themes of Blue Remembered Earth. The book begins in Africa, 150 years in the future, and Africa is the leading technological power, having bootstrapped its way to dominance. The way I see it happening, I've been reading articles about how entrepreneurialism in Africa is really taking off – people are doing really interesting things with cell phones in Africa. They've developed protocols for cell phone banking, which really suits the environment, if you like; they're being creative, taking technology which is getting cheaper and cheaper and they're not afraid to grab it and use it. There's also the gradual uptake of Internet in Africa – there's an initiative in Ghana to push Internet access in Africa. It's beginning slowly but the progress they've made in the last few years is impressive in terms of the percentage of the population that now has internet access.

"Given these trends I don't particularly worry about the developing world being left behind; if anything, the developing world will seize the initiative, if you like, and springboard ahead, I hope. That's an optimistic take."

Perry reinforces Reynolds' view: "It's already happening. If you look at anything that's happening in countries overseas, like China, you can see when they build buildings they're completely open to new ideas, they don't have ridiculous preconditions that everything has to look the same. You go to foreign countries and they're trying new ideas aggressively."

"You will take control of your health, to the point where you might insert a device under the skin"

The collective optimism for a future in which any nation and culture might lead the charge in an ever-changing technological age both excites and encourages, but it's tempered by Gibson's sober assertion that, as history has often proven, "technology mainly divides those who can't afford it from those who can."

For those who can afford the luxury that technology often brings, the pursuit of health and beauty are major driving forces in both industrial progress and profit. Harrison sees health and well-being as crucial to the future of gaming and the technology it harnesses: "You will see gamification of health become, I think, the next massive growth industry. There's going to be a huge healthcare industry investment in this area – how you test and sample the realtime performance of a human body from a health and well-being perspective. And once that technology layer has been built, the very first thing that's going to monetise it, in my opinion, is games."

Harrison sees this sector as one supported by an advanced iteration of current-gen devices: "I think in ten years it will still be screen-based; there will be more sophisticated sensors built into tablets that are going to be not just touch sensors but biometric sensors. I think there will be an industry that will appear out of personal biometrics, where as a human being you will take more control of your own health and well-being by getting data from your own body. I'm talking about subtle and sophisticated biometric data – blood oxygen, the number of calories you burn, even potentially to the point where you might insert some kind of device under the skin. Like near-field contactless technology, where you swipe your phone over your wrist or wear a wristwatch that beams data from under your skin to your mobile device. This sounds like science fiction but there are many companies working on this."

The convergence of man and machine on the micro scale, and technology and society on the macro, is the thread binding together these many predictions and promises for the future. It's easy, in an age of instant gratification and impulse consumerism, to ask anxiously: when will we get there? When will the real and virtual unify? When will reality be truly augmented? Gibson offers the most balanced, clear-sighted rejoinder: "I think that's sort of like asking when we'll get the helmet-and-goggles VR we were promised in the '80s. We didn't get that. We got *Grand Theft Auto*. Full immersion via strength of content. Save the helmet for your bike. We're already there. We get a little more there every day." ■

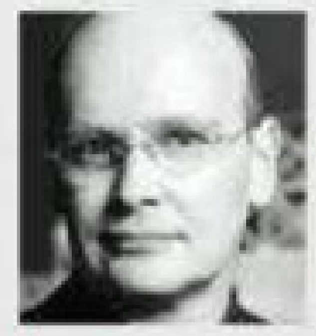

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Author


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Author


Phil Harrison
General partner, London Venture Partners




Come Get Some...
EX-01 Headset
PS3
EX-02s Headset
PS3
EX-03 Headset
PS3 Xbox 360
EX-04 Headset
PS3 Xbox 360
EX-05 Headset
PS3 Xbox 360
DUAL FUEL AMMO BOX
WARNING
HANDLE WITH EXTREME CAUTION
AC-1 Charger
PS3 Xbox 360
DF-1 Charger
PS3 Xbox 360
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PLAY

REVIEWS. INTERVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Trials HD 360, PS3
Like any leaderboard-driven game, you never outright conquer *Trials HD*. Even if you've exhausted months of your life bagging every platinum medal, there's always an Xbox Live friend whose lucky (we pretend it's luck, don't we?), scary-fast time on a particular track forever eludes our thumbs, mocking us to top it. How perfectly sublime, the feeling of hopping back on the bike, so utterly in tune with its handling that the frame's slightest buck and bounce submits to our will.

Portal 2 360, PC PS3
When will more developers begin providing in-game commentaries, let alone ones as interesting, articulate and amusing as Valve's? As well as offering an excellent excuse to jump straight back into a puzzle- and narrative-focused game, those spinning orange speech bubbles offer a well-balanced mix of technical insight and anecdotal trivia, as well as very occasionally aiding you in your search for the well-hidden, Easter-egg-laden nooks you may have missed first time around.

Flower PS3
Being offline, it turns out, isn't all that bad. OK, so we couldn't try *Portal 2*'s cloud-saving feature, but PSN's recent hiccup inspired us to return to the rolling hills and gentle breezes of *Flower*, thatgamecompany's ode to placidity. The only thing that could make the experience better, we thought while swooping through the game's verdant meadows soundtracked by acoustic guitar refrains, would be griefing, homophobic slurs and lag.

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

bit.ly/it2QiG
Up-to-the-minute reviews and previews

A new take on videogame reviews for a new Edge

Over the next 25 pages, we'll be looking at whether or not a wave of upcoming and recently released games deserve your time and money. We'll discuss each game's highlights and flaws and, after a bit of beard stroking, assign a numerical score much as we've always done.

Turn to the conclusion of our lead reviews, however, and you'll notice an additional feature, something we've titled Post Script. On p105, for instance, you'll find our discussion of the awkward relationship between cinematic storytelling techniques and a game design predicated on mystery in Team Bondi's *LA Noire*. On p112, we talk to Q Entertainment's Tetsuya Mizuguchi about some of the thinking that informed his latest creation, *Child Of Eden*. We also have conversations with key members of the development teams behind *Brink* and *Infamous 2*, and discuss characterisation and gender in *The Witcher 2*.



There's more to say about many games than can fit into a single write-up, but we intend to submit our curated selection of games to more scrutiny than ever before. Our starting point will always be whether a game deserves your attention at all but, from there, we aim to explore design aspects that we can only lightly touch upon in the context of a review – because they're fascinating but tangential, perhaps, or because we don't want to risk spoilers in the review itself. Perhaps there's a broader cultural resonance to one particular aspect of a game, which begs for something a little more critique-y and less akin to a traditional product review. Regardless of which avenue is explored with each title, we hope you enjoy the additional perspectives and insight that Post Scripts bring to the review process.

LA Noire

If nothing else, *LA Noire* is a tribute to the power of production values. There's that sprawling set, for a start: a recreation of '40s LA that – despite a half-hearted sprinkling of collectibles – functions merely as the backdrop for its brooding tales of post-war moral corruption. Then there's the painstakingly detailed props, which range from the incidental and world building – contemporary car models, authentic storefronts, a full range of '40s fashions – to the utterly central: the telltale lawyer's letters, train tickets and bloodstained knives that you, Detective Cole Phelps, will rifle through. And then there are the faces.

It's impossible to overstate just how crucial the Motion Scan technology is to the success of *LA Noire*. The interrogation scenes may turn every tic, twitch and flicker of the eyes into something to be deciphered, but even if the game's astonishing facial animation was a mere cosmetic enhancement, its inclusion would be justified. Hints of the uncanny valley remain, of course. Hair is worn up or cut short in *LA Noire*, to minimise the disjoint between its static nature and that of the features below. As detailed as the faces are, you won't mistake them for the real thing up close, but what matters is that they're equally expressive, and it's this that allows the subtleties of a performance to emerge. It would be unfair to say Nathan Drake has lost his charm, but suddenly he looks a lot more cartoonish.

Every case begins with a crime scene, and investigating these burglarised houses, abandoned vehicles and discarded corpses is easy enough. The boundary defining where clues can be found is marked aurally – by moody jazz that plays while you're on the scene. Walk past an item that can be investigated and you'll hear a two-note tinkle accompanied by a controller vibration. While this aid can be turned off, it's hard to tell interactive objects from static scenery without it, and it draws your attention to red herrings, too. We switched off the instrumental flourish and ensuing silence that lets you know you've 'completed' a crime scene, however: a feature which helps avoid endless searching, but also undercuts the tension of building a case. While some clues require the solving of a simple puzzle – assembling a water heater to work out the shape of a missing pipe, for instance – for the most part clue-gathering is a methodical process – the challenge comes not from finding evidence, but knowing when to deploy it.

At its core, *LA Noire*'s interview mechanic is pure *Phoenix Wright* – you listen to witness testimony, presenting contradictory evidence when you suspect a lie. It's complicated by two factors, however – the presence of a 'doubt' option alongside believing or accusing them, and your interviewees' faces.

The doubt option – which causes Phelps to push his interlocutor a little harder – calls even pieces of testimony that don't contradict your evidence into question. Judging whether or not a statement can be trusted requires you to scrutinise a suspect's expression – are they looking shifty? Biting their lip? Avoiding your gaze? If so, you can try to drag the truth out of them. Trust a faulty statement and you'll miss out on the full story; accuse a sincere witness of holding back and they'll clam up angrily.

Publisher Rockstar Games
Developer Team Bondi, Rockstar
Format 360, PS3 (version tested)
Release Out now

bit.ly/mg6Uo4
Extensive preview feature

It has no desire to be anything other than pulp fiction, yet it achieves moments of genuine poignancy



It's not an entirely logical system. You'd think, for instance, that well-meaning witnesses would give you more than one chance to get the truth, though this limitation is essential for generating tension during the more fraught head-to-heads, and on more than one occasion we found ourselves absolutely certain that our suspect was lying – but not sure which incriminating piece of evidence the game wanted us to use to prove it. Nonetheless, Motion Scan takes what could have been a mere fact-checking exercise and imbues it with a beguilingly human element. Early witnesses ham it up for the camera, with the kind of overt shiftiness you'd expect from a child telling their first lie. As the game continues, however, expressions become more subtle – suspects giving themselves away with nothing more than a tightening of the lips. And, of course, there are times you'll be confronted with an excellent liar you'll need a little assistance to outwit (see 'On a hunch').

Interrogation and investigation are the heart of the game, but by no means all of it. Tying together the game's detective work is a host of action beats – car chases, shootouts, chases on foot, fistfights – which are woven directly into Phelps' cases as well as the optional (and brief) street crime missions. They don't always thrill mechanically. After the Euphoria-powered shootouts of *Red Dead Redemption*, Team Bondi's clunkier cover-based gunplay can feel a little flat. And while the in-car action fares better, vehicle handling is simplified to point of feeling over-twitchy. Nonetheless, this mostly seamless genre blend ensures that almost every case is well-paced, and in turn, this pacing benefits the action itself – *LA Noire* may not have best shooting, driving or brawling around, but at least these most familiar of actions for once have dramatic weight.

Indeed, drama is something at which the game excels. In comparison to, say, *Heavy Rain*, which aimed for emotional maturity but descended into melodramatic hokum, *LA Noire* has no desire to be anything other than pure pulp fiction, yet it achieves moments of more genuine poignancy on the way. In a game preoccupied with lurid murder and outlandish conspiracy, watching grief overwhelm the hitherto stoic features of a bereaved lover can be unexpectedly affecting. A high-quality script – with an excellent ear for police patter and '40s slang – does some of the work, but much credit must go to the actors. Aaron



RIGHT It's usually pretty easy to know if someone's telling the truth – their features will be relatively neutral and they'll be looking you in the eye. Nervy suspects are harder: are they hiding something, or just naturally shifty? Each must be assessed individually. **BELOW** A corpse will often hold some clues. Perhaps mindful of a tabloid backlash, Team Bondi has restricted your investigations to above the waist, leaving it to the coroner to provide details in cases that involve sexual assault





ABOVE Phelps decides when and where to pull his gun – *GTA*-esque rampages are hard to achieve. If you really try, pedestrians can be knocked down with a vehicle, but they'll usually make a last-minute dive for safety



Adam Harrington's performance as the slimy vice detective Roy Earle is another of the game's dramatic highlights. Phelps is lumbered with this particular partner over the course of the vice cases



LA Noire's recreation of LA is light on distraction, though this isn't really a problem. The game maintains momentum by ensuring you're always on a case, rather than dumping you back in the city between missions

Staten gives a solid central performance as the likable Phelps, but it's the supporting cast that stands out. Andrew Connolly's charismatic, fire-breathing turn as the captain of the homicide desk dominates any scene he's in, while a host of cameos from recognisable faces from the past decade of US TV ensures that even the bit-parts are of a generally high-calibre. In any other game, an engaging script and convincing performances would be merely cosmetic, but here they're essential. The interrogations and interviews blur the line between cutscene and gameplay more than any QTE could ever hope to, and ensure that these at turns convincing, disturbing and stirring performances aren't just there to be watched, but actively engaged with.

Compounding the sense that this is a game in thrall to television as much as cinema is the episodic structure. Phelps works four 'desks' over the course of the game, each built from a series of cases roughly an hour long, and relatively self-contained. It's a structure that deftly avoids the videogame pitfall of the bloated second act, ensuring that, around the point most videogame stories would be pointlessly padding themselves out, *LA Noire* is handing Phelps new partners, taking him to fresh parts of LA, and poking around in previously unseen parts of the city's underbelly. Still, there are some drawbacks to this approach. Many cases are overly similar in setup and structure, and the script's awareness of this (copycat crimes, the work of one person or coincidences?) only goes so far towards mitigating the sense of repetition.

At times, it's hard to tell how much influence you really have over *LA Noire* – its cases accommodate your actions rather than allow themselves to be influenced by them. Mess up the questioning of a witness and nearby clues will point you in the right direction, for instance, and if they don't you'll simply have to chase a few more dead ends than if you'd extracted the correct lead. On occasion, the game will give you control of a case's conclusion – letting you decide, when applicable, which of your suspects you'd like to charge. These dilemmas can be near impossible to resolve – and missed clues or failed interrogations will niggle more than a poor rating on your post-case report card ever will. Indeed, there are occasions when you may find yourself lacking faith in either of the cases you've built, and resenting the enforced decision – though whether this is an accurate reflection of the moral compromises involved in police work or a design pitfall is hard to tell.

Nonetheless, *LA Noire* is a success story. Over its 20-hour-plus length, it cuts a cross-section through the moral, social and geographical landscape of a city that carefully treads the line between a plausible '40s LA and the morally bankrupt City of Angels found in hardboiled fiction. The characters populating this stage and the stories they tell aren't always affecting, but they are uniquely convincing. And the competent (if creaky) action mechanics make *LA Noire* a rare thing – an adventure title with the capacity to thrill, and an action game that sees the virtue in holstering its gun. With the exception of its facial capture, there's no single aspect of Team Bondi's title that hasn't been done better elsewhere, but few developers have brought such a diffuse set of genres together so atmospherically, stylishly or cohesively.

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ON A HUNCH

Completing interrogations earns experience points that contribute to Phelps' rank. Ranking up earns extras such as a new outfits and, on occasion, intuition points. These can be used when investigating crime scenes to briefly highlight all clues in the area – or during interrogations to remove an incorrect response from your options. *LA Noire* rations the distribution of these potentially overpowerful points over the course of the game, and when used in interviews they have a Who Wants To Be A Millionaire-esque knack for removing only the least likely of options.

Post Script

In its haste to build complex mysteries, does LA Noire let the player in on too much?

Warning: this section discusses major story details from LA Noire*, and therefore features spoilers.*

It's a classic noir setup. A good cop convinced that the crimes he's investigating aren't the isolated incidents they appear to be, butting heads with a coldhearted police department that appears more interested in pinning the blame on a series of unlucky fall guys than risking a wild goose chase. It's a premise that has for decades admirably served the films and novels from which *LA Noire* draws inspiration, but it's one that feels, at times, a slightly awkward fit when translated into an interactive experience.

Part of the problem of making a genre piece is that your audience knows what to expect. And that, to be fair, is exactly the key to *LA Noire*'s appeal. Hardboiled detective fiction has inspired very few videogames to date, and successfully transplanting the plot devices, character types and themes from classic noir stories into a game is enough to make them feel fresher than they truly are. This same allure surrounds much of Rockstar's output – *Red Dead Redemption* cannibalised every western it could to create its world, but getting to explore and participate in the landscapes and stories we'd seen on cinema screens was exactly the point.

But still, basic familiarity with noir thrillers and crime dramas means that, as soon as Phelps begins to argue that the similarities between the Black Dahlia murder and the cases he's investigating are more than just coincidence, you suspect he has a point. Your partner's assertion that the murderers are simply angry lovers using the Dahlia killing as a smokescreen for their own crimes has the potential to be an effective piece of misdirection – and would perhaps have worked if Team Bondi had scripted one case in which this was explicitly so. By the time of The Silk Stocking Murder, however, it's increasingly difficult to believe, not least because the case opens with the kind of gruesome scavenger hunt popularised by fictional serial killers.

This is also the case in which Phelps misses a shockingly obvious lead. Visit the bar in which the victim spent her final hours and there'll be two references to a bartender from a temping agency working the night before – on its own, this wouldn't be particularly ominous, but Phelps has met a man fitting just such a description over the course of a previous murder case. It's overt enough that Team Bondi must expect players to notice, and therefore all the more irritating when Phelps does not. Films and books can deal in this kind of dramatic irony, but in the context of a detective drama in which you play the detective, it's not dramatically satisfying, it's simply a lead you've spotted but are unable to follow. As the bodies in the homicide cases continue to mount up, the choice of which suspect to charge in the cases that demand you do so becomes increasingly hollow. A shame, because when you believe one of the individuals in custody is truly guilty, it's an anxiety-inducing decision to make.

> Films and books can deal in dramatic irony, but in a game it's simply a lead you've spotted but are unable to follow



The gap between what the player knows and what Phelps understands to be the case is made even wider by the collectible newspapers littering crime scenes. For the first third of the game, the cutscenes they trigger are unrelated to your police work, the narrative seeds they sow only coming to fruition during the vice and arson desks. While they're pure noir, providing hints of intrigue and reassuring the player that grander mysteries will follow the relatively benign early cases, there's something discordant about making the player privy to plot threads of which Phelps has no idea, and something even more questionable about inserting these scenes in the investigation sections. The point of detective work is divining the significance of cryptic, opaque clues – but when picking up a newspaper presents you with a fly-on-the-wall view of the clandestine meetings in which crimes are plotted and conspiracies formed, the later investigation scenes can become a matter of helping Phelps catch up with what you already know. One newspaper, found halfway through the game, strongly hints at the outcome of the arson desk, hours before you poke through the ashes of your first smoking building. It's a mirror image of *Heavy Rain*'s misstep. Whereas Quantic Dream's game broke the connection between player and character by withholding crucial information, Team Bondi weakens the connection by allowing the player to know important facts that the character they're controlling does not.

Could *LA Noire*'s story work if the player's knowledge was a match for Phelps'? Mysteries would be opaque until their unravelling, and characters who increase in prominence towards the end of the game could end up feeling unsatisfactorily developed. This is one reason why the World War II flashbacks work so well: the cast of ex-GIs who play significant roles in *LA Noire*'s later cases are developed not by giving the player sneaky peeks at plot threads of which Phelps has no knowledge, but by tapping in to his memories to flesh out his and their entwined pasts. Admittedly, such an approach wouldn't work for the game's villains, but if downplaying *LA Noire*'s conspiracy would mean foregrounding its mystery, perhaps it would have been worth keeping both player and detective in the dark. ■

Infamous 2

Publisher SCE
Developer Sucker Punch
Format PS3
Release Out now (US), June 8 (EU)

Consider Cole MacGrath, the returning hero of *Infamous*, proof of what lies at the eye of a storm: nothing. He might look like actor Sam Worthington and sound like Batman, but to see him is almost to see through him. His eyes are permanently narrow, fixed on his next opponent or waypoint. His mouth is just a slit, source of little more than cynically devised canon. His head is shaved, his arms inked with high-street tattoos. His only magnetism is electrical.

There's no real excuse for this, but the argument will be that he speaks with his powers, and in that respect he's a poet. No sooner has the game begun than he's siphoning electricity from anything plugged in and firing it out as bullets, shields, bombs, rockets, restraints, tractor beams, defibrillating shocks, kinetic blasts and, ultimately, lightning. It's the loadout from a dozen popular action games given a makeover.

Infamous 2 is interactive fan fiction, a clumsy pop-culture magpie. Its best weapon: the sticky bomb, which is identical to *Halo*'s plasma grenade in almost every respect. Its biggest villain: The Beast, a giant glowing man who, it's revealed, has everything in common with Watchmen's Dr Manhattan. Its story: Watchmen again, via Blade II and X-Men. Its environment: somewhere between *Left 4 Dead 2*, *Crackdown*, *Mercenaries* and *The Saboteur*, and often distractingly similar to one or the other. And *LittleBigPlanet*? We'll get to that.

What little of the story matters involves the destruction of Empire City (New York) by the aforementioned Beast, whose trek across America is watched avidly by in-game TV broadcasts. MacGrath flees to New Marais (New Orleans) in the deep south, a place of conflict and superstition – a perfect dojo for his powers. But what's this? The levees have broken and feral mutant freaks have started rising from the floods. For nefarious private army the Militia, it's the perfect staging ground for a war against the Conduits, the world's emerging population of supermen and women.

Together with sidekick gadget man Zeke, MacGrath quickly teams up with bickering supergirls Nix (an atrociously characterised voodoo tribeswoman) and Kuo (a special agent on the wrong side of a Militia experiment). To say this dovetails with returning plot threads from *Infamous* would be generous: for newcomers to the series, much of the dialogue will sound like impenetrable fanboy gobbledygook.

From a gameplay perspective, what's really important is that MacGrath needs enough power to activate the RFI, a shiny round MacGuffin full of dormant special effects, and the last, best hope against The Beast. This he achieves by consuming 'Blast Cores' found in key story missions.

To be fair, *Infamous 2* is a game of two halves, only one of which is horrible. The first, which sees the game methodically set its agenda, is actually pretty good. The murky and misty New Marais is a much better place for the series' murky and misty in-game palette, not to mention a melting pot of bustling pedestrians. You're reminded of the how well the game reacts physically to MacGrath's actions, cars dying as their batteries are sucked dry, buildings shredded by combat. And with a broader range of entry-level powers than last time, moving up and around the buildings is a painless and more attractive process.

The game reacts to MacGrath, cars dying as their batteries are sucked dry, buildings shredded by combat



The moral reactions, meanwhile, are the binary nonsense you'd expect. Good and evil story missions are typically represented by Kuo and Nix respectively, the latter a tiresome psychopath only a 13-year old arsonist would empathise with. No one side has the better missions, so let your playing style, upgrade choices or fashion sense be the judge. Random opportunity missions – disarming a bomb is good, cop-killing is evil – push your moral compass further, giving you a BioWare-worthy makeover and honing your abilities to suit. By the time you reach the Final Decision – the last level's actually called that – you're really expected to have chosen already.

The game would do itself plenty of favours by just establishing this alignment off the bat. It would save Sucker Punch a lot of paperwork and the player time and legwork, and might even encourage some actual storytelling. It's hard to imagine someone grinding through these games with a mind to creating an ambivalent character, and when the paths are akin to choosing one *Resident Evil 2* disc over the other, the choice coming down to what you hope will play the best, this imposed hand-wringing gets annoying.

Increasingly so, in fact, as the game's second half descends into a fiasco. You'll have realised by this point that all of the bosses, no matter their size, just need you to wait until they're vulnerable before getting out the sticky bombs. The Devourer, a quadruped which exposes itself in order to vomit, is one of the most dire bosses you've ever seen, and spends about as much time dying as it does alive. Mind you, the seldom-seen Behemoth is a sight to behold, if only to confirm how large a creature can successfully navigate an open world.

Missions at this point are tedious and infuriatingly exploitative, using repeat objectives swamped by enemies to draw out the game's campaign length. MacGrath isn't like Alex Mercer, star of the vastly superior *Prototype*. He doesn't flow as well through the map: he's too meticulous in his climbing; too awkward in his flight and zip-lining; too restricted in his grinding; and too human on the ground. It makes travel between distant waypoints a chore, and keeps battles rooted to wherever they begin. Worse, the game's combat is fundamentally bad: there's no such thing as a clean kill, enemies requiring a sustained splashing





ABOVE Mo-cap at least makes the unskippable cutscenes watchable, and they're in the same technical ballpark as *Uncharted*'s. The one-dimensional characters, wisecracking dialogue and copycat story make them less fun



TOP & ABOVE The recurring bad guy at the top succumbs to rocket spam or casually timed melee attacks, and throws chucks of ice which move at a glacial pace. The boss immediately above will happily hold his ground while you hide around the corner throwing sticky bombs, taking a quick breather while you do a button-mash QTE.
RIGHT Nix's missions tend to bring the fireworks a bit more than Kuo's, and to the game's credit take an entirely different approach to a general objective. Reason enough to play through the entire game again? Only if you've played all the better ones out there





Transplants from *Crackdown* include a giant tower which offers a remarkably similar view of the city but no actual challenge in the ascent, and a giant gasworks – of all things – which is as exciting as it looks

of powers to stop them repeatedly getting back up.

None of which would be so bad if certain earlier action games didn't exist, without which *Infamous* would, problematically, not exist either. The rule of thumb with a ripoff: if you're going to do it, do it different or do it better. Which is where we introduce – drum roll – the first user-generated content feature in an open-world action game. Fanboys will love this mode because it offers two serendipitous things: an excuse for the main game turning to cabbage, and a reason to never get to that point in the first place. It's the best thing about *Infamous 2* by a mile.

It's beautifully integrated, for a start, and any imitators should consider it gospel. Depending on what filters you specify in the pause menu, it sprinkles community missions across the map while you play the singleplayer campaign, the XP counting towards your general development. You can filter by things like fame and date, and because the editor is parser-based and features most of the game's behaviours and assets, it covers a bewildering array of action subgenres.

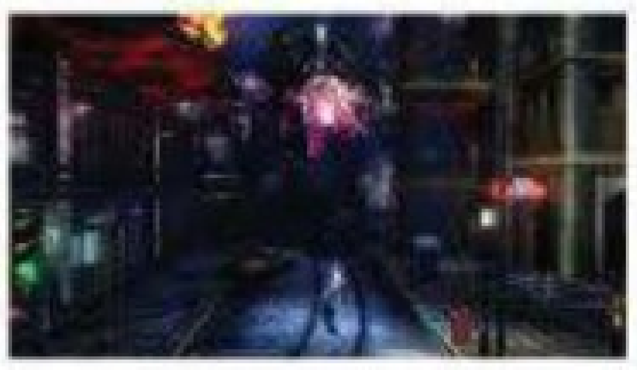
Popping in and out of the editor is done entirely in-game, though be wary of where the mission's set because that's where it dumps you when you return to the campaign. Missions are built using a visual scripting language which uses distinct and clearly labelled building blocks you lay around the game world. One such cluster of nodes would create the rule: 'When the mission starts, make the Militia hostile towards The Client [an NPC] and make the Militia neutral towards Cole'. That's for an escort mission.

Sucker Punch has provided plenty of examples, as well as several basic templates. Conversation is limited to text, obviously, which in a game full of spoken dialogue and motion-captured cutscenes is a jarring but acceptable compromise. All in all, it's a sophisticated tool, a UI feat, and a massively promising concept. But is this the game in which it belongs?

Given the choice, what would the majority of *Infamous* fans prefer? A polished action game which keeps its cool under pressure? (*Infamous 2* does not, its camera going haywire in certain circumstances, its framerate dropping, its smoke effects suffering the same violent defects as *Gran Turismo 5*'s, and its tactics going to pot.) A campaign which doesn't go to pieces, and one that's not full of bosses that should have been killed at birth? Fewer bugs, such as the ones that – in our review code at least – led to two game-breaking glitches (one pathfinding, the other clipping) and two repeat trips through missions and unskippable cutscenes? Co-op? That's a popular one.

Or do they really want the chance to make their own levels – a time-consuming endeavour to be worthwhile – and take on the job of making an average game better? By leaving its priorities open to question, Sucker Punch has made a confusing gesture. And with its choice of examples – one just gives you a few seconds to appreciate a giant '8bit' effigy of MacGrath made out of crates; others involve the game's flawed action in simple configurations – it's complicated it even more. Is this a progressive action game or a cock-eyed alternative to *LittleBigPlanet*? Sucker Punch's game or Sony's latest brand experiment with 'Play, Create, Share'? One thing's for certain: if there's a great action game in *Infamous 2*, no one's actually built it yet.

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TOBIN OR NOT TOBIN?

From what we can tell by the credits, Brazilian drum'n'bass adventurer Amon Tobin has not returned for this game's soundtrack. In his place is a small army of string performers and composers who've done their best impersonation of his work with the Kronos Quartet – and the result is often baffling. There isn't enough of it, for a start, the same tracks murmuring away throughout much of the game. Stranger still, it barely seems to fit what's happening onscreen, either in theme or timing. When it does, though, it successfully keys in to the Dixieland theme the game shares with *Left 4 Dead 2*.

Post Script

Interview: Brian Fleming, co-founder, Sucker Punch

Founded in 1997, Seattle-based Sucker Punch Productions has specialised in thirdperson action-adventure, from *Rocket: Robot On Wheels* to *Sly Raccoon* and *Infamous* and its sequel. **Brian Fleming** (right), one of the studio's founders, talks user-generated content, Sony's knowledge-pool, and how the times haven't really changed in game development.



UGC isn't traditionally implemented in thirdperson action games – why introduce it to *Infamous 2*?
It started with jealousy. We saw the presentation of UGC where they introduced *LittleBigPlanet* [at GDC], and were like: "That is a great idea. I wish we'd thought of that." Occasionally you just come across ideas that really connect. It seemed like something Sucker Punch would have been good at doing – maybe not as good as Media Molecule – but it just resonated with me and the other founders. So we finished *Infamous*, and we had been talking about UGC even before *Infamous* had been completed.

Then it came time to start talking about *Infamous 2* and what we were going to do. I think every triple-A developer has clearly had the 'are we adding multiplayer?' conversation. Our sense is that there are lots of games that get multiplayer added that it doesn't fit well in. We couldn't see that multiplayer fit well in our game. We started talking about taking some of the internal tools we use to make missions and started asking why can't we do this in a sandbox game – nobody has done it but why couldn't we do it?

"We saw the presentation of UGC where they introduced LBP, and we were like: 'I wish we'd thought of that'"

Where there any influences outside of Sony's IP?
We certainly have looked at all that stuff. Even thinking about *Minecraft* and other games that have done a good job of letting people build and create in the world and how important that is. You read lots and you talk to people on some of those teams and learn from them. What they all tell you is: you're thinking about the tip of the iceberg, not the chunk that's underwater; don't forget the backend and moderation and how you're going to localise all this stuff and the huge problems you need to solve. You get life lessons from them.

Media Molecule gave us the most actual feedback. It was a treat that they're in the family, so we could call them. Based on their advice we changed our recruiting plans because we needed to look for people who could help us on the backend stuff.

How intimate are Sony's studios?
We are tremendously good friends with the other studios. The thing that has helped us the most has been sharing experiences. This was the first time we were doing a big motion-capture set, so our game director spent a lot of the time on the phone and at E3 with Amy [Hennig, creative director at Naughty Dog]. They were able to give us friendly advice on problems we've never had to solve before.

The second thing we do is visit each other, usually about once a project. The principals at Sucker Punch will go down and spend a day at Naughty Dog. We'll just visit with all the team leads, talk to them about what they're doing, and we'll get inspired by all the clever ideas they have. And they'll come down and talk to our leads about how we build missions, characters, how we import animation and what our lighting technology is. It really helps you to understand process, personnel... It's about how you think about problems.



Does *Infamous 2*'s UGC mean there's a danger your own singleplayer game gets overshadowed?
I don't worry about it as such. If it turned out – which maybe it will – that the best part of our game is the UGC: great. We want to make customers happy, if the way to make them happy is to give them a gateway to becoming famous mission authors: super. Will it alter the direction of our future projects? Probably. Do I expect that that will happen? I'd be surprised. Would I rule it out? Nope.

How did you balance story and action?
In the original we felt the core of the game, the parkour and powers-based combat, were the things we must build around. And the story, while good, wasn't on that list – we didn't feel like we hit the ball out of the park on that part so we took a pretty big swing at how we do our storytelling. It encompasses everything, it's the motion capture, the quality of the performances we were shooting for in terms of how much we were willing to invest in stage time and how many takes. You're spending incremental funds and time trying to get good performances.

Do you find game development now less about the game and more about the backend than it was?
It's still all about the game. Back then it was about the same stuff. You're folding in new layers [now]. You used to have an animation team that, in *Rocket* days, was a handful of people, and now you have very specific disciplines. It gets more specialised but it's very much the same process. We're a one-team shop, and the vast majority of our time has been one [project] at a time and we're desperately trying to stay as small as we can be. We're around 75 full-timers with a QA staff of about 20. For us, tools and attention to production processes and design decisions all relate to how we stay small. We think that there's a lot of frictional cost to being big. ■

Child Of Eden

Publisher Ubisoft
Developer Q Entertainment
Format 360 (version tested), PS3
Release June 17 (360), September (PS3)

bit.ly/m6soda
Extensive preview feature

Child Of Eden is the product of an auteur at the height of his powers, with the free rein to realise a supremely ambitious project and the restraint to make it universal rather than self-serving. At its core are the on-rails shooter mechanics of *Rez*, but the experience is one that escapes further genre categorisation, creating a level of involvement beyond what its 2001 progenitor achieved.

Eden is as much an interactive sightseeing tour as it is a shooter, inviting you to both animate and liberate its world and devastate the enemies occupying it. Most of the creatures you encounter, from transparent whales swimming through space to a musical golden eagle, are not to be destroyed but purified of their infection, with your cursor and button presses allowing them to shimmer and shine once more. As outlandish as it may seem, it's all tied to *Eden*'s threadbare narrative: the story of space-born girl Lumi, reconstructed by science in the virtual world and under threat from a virus you're sent in to eradicate. It's a simple premise that allows the team to tell its story visually, through the game's action rather than cutscenes, and it's kept fresh by the pace and variety of the five main worlds. Rarely has a game managed to relay a tale of creation and destruction with so few words and so poetically. From the neon underworld of Evolution to the grinding cogs and speeding cars of Passion, it's a breathtaking world to witness as a player or spectator. The extravagance of *Eden*, with its poetic celebration of nature and streaming, kaleidoscopic colours, could easily have slipped into the territory of elitist, artistic pretensions, but it never feels self-indulgent. The game isn't a hollow exercise in visual and audio design, it empowers you to be central to its story through your interactions.

The sense of participation is affected drastically by your choice of control method. On first contact, nothing compares to the feeling of power granted by Kinect as you swipe over your targets before shoving them into extinction with a gentle push of your hand. The two modes of attack – rapid fire for incoming projectiles and lock-on for everything besides – are central to the gameplay. Swapping hands to toggle these fire modes is mandatory for survival, adding an *Ikaruga*-style strategy to the game. Achieving an eight-hit combo, or 'Octa-Lock', in time to the music racks up more points, while picking up health orbs along the way keeps you, often literally, on your toes. It's not always a smooth ride, though, mostly due to a camera which (as in *Rez*) moves on its axis as you navigate the screen. When swapping hands, it's often nudged from its position, and throwing your hands to the sky to effect a screen-clearing Euphoria special can be fatally disorienting. Your journey through Eden is too freeform, dense with twists and screen-flipping turns (in contrast to *Rez*'s more linear motion) to forgive such a technical issue, and your orientation troubles are only exaggerated as the pace ramps up. When gunning for high scores, therefore, a standard controller is the way to go. The rhythmic rumble feedback is crucial for achieving hits in time to the music but, again, it's not perfect. In both cases, trying to rein in your view of the action while battling the onscreen assault can prove overwhelming. Repeat playthroughs on hard difficulty are punishing, teeth-grinding affairs entirely at odds with the calm, colourful world around you.

Where Rez was focused and relentless, in step with the rigidity of its basslines, Eden is organic and sentimental



The real incentive for persevering through the harshness of *Eden*'s world is the character of Lumi. An iconic, angelic figure, her floating presence in the menu screen and the echoes of her voice throughout the game (see 'Magical mystery score') are obscure and affecting. The use of an actress rather than CG adds further resonance. Bringing Lumi one step closer to freedom with the purification of each world is a strangely emotional experience; your simple hand motions are her only hope as she strobes into view, holding your gaze. Hearing her voice crackle through the layers of audio or glimpsing her face behind a wall adds a human payoff to your virtual crusade.

Though the five main worlds of *Eden* tell Lumi's story and host some visually arresting ideas, it's in unlockable challenge mode Hope that Mizuguchi's skill with an audio landscape is fully demonstrated. A hyper-speed, spiritual and visual ancestor of *Rez*, Hope is as close to a direct sequel as fans could hope for. Rainbows of pixel stardust burst around you as the bassline morphs along with the colour palette, shifting from jazz riffs to drum'n'bass. Though the control-method quandary rears its head in the later stages, it's less of an inconvenience due to the linear path through the level. There are further overtones of *Rez* in tutorial mode Matrix, which also devotes itself to a more straightforward route. In bookending *Eden*'s core worlds with these nods to the past, Tetsuya Mizuguchi is cementing both his status as auteur and his journey full circle from *Rez*'s debut. *Eden* encompasses so much of the producer-designer's oeuvre – from the musical female lead of *Space Channel 5* to the chain reactions of *Every Extend Extra* – that it's as much a journey into his legacy as it is a rescue mission.

Child Of Eden is a convincing example of how motion control can breathe new life into a niche genre. More than that, it's a masterclass in audio design and the emotive power of CG imagery. Where *Rez* was focused and relentless, in step with the rigidity of its basslines, *Eden* is organic and sentimental, a lover married to the mechanics of an on-rails fighter. It's a delirious, intoxicating and sometimes cruel world that's well worth the trip.

8



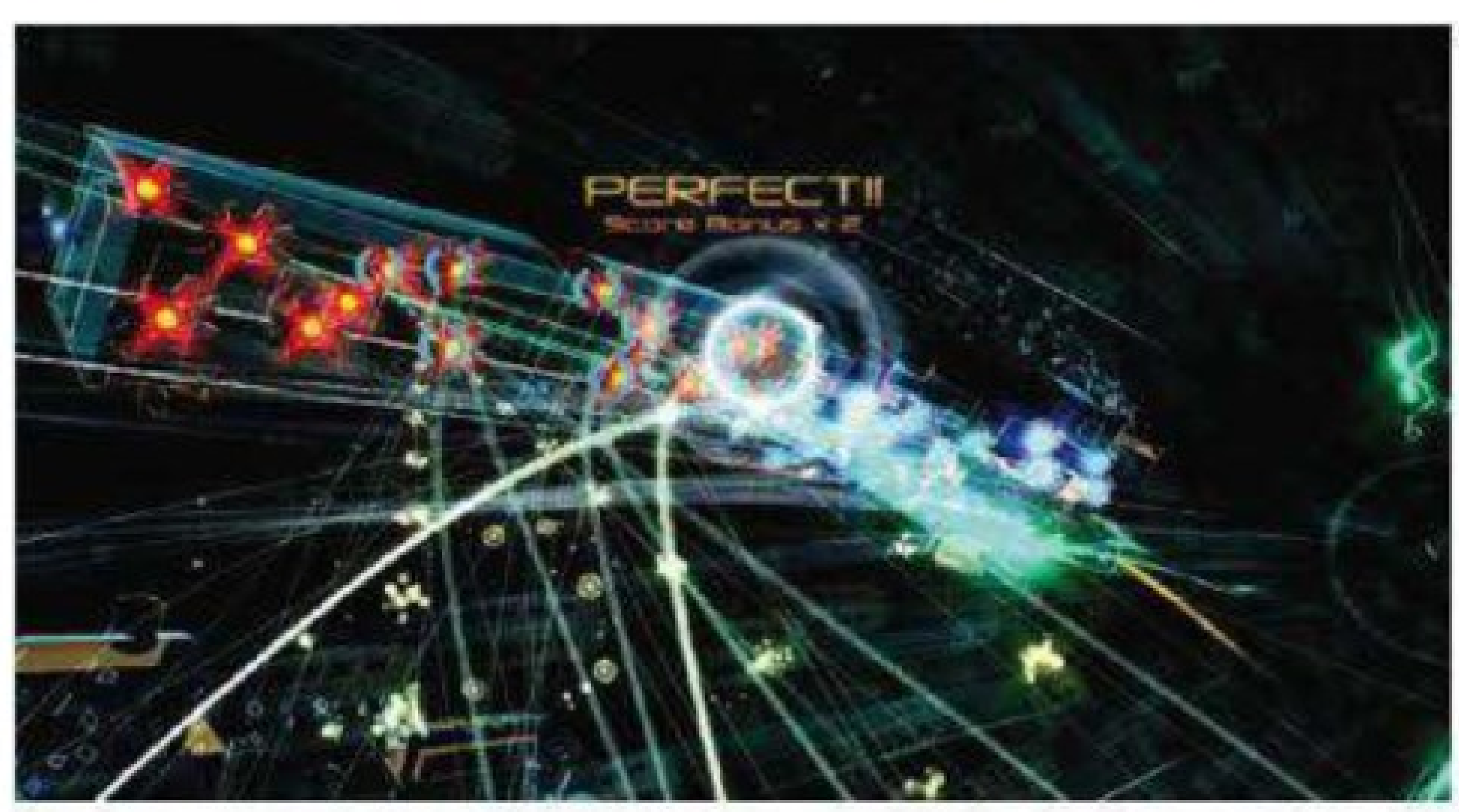


ABOVE *Child Of Eden* leaves no colour of the rainbow unused. From the luminous blues and greens of Evolution to the glistening, reflective glory of Beauty, the game is eye-catching in stills and eye-watering in motion. LEFT A difficulty setting called Feel Eden offers invincibility and unlimited time to take in the mesmerising landscapes

Ubisoft's innovative marketing for the game ties in with Android/iOS app Digital Space. Users of the free app should take a closer look at p78–79 in order to access *Child Of Eden* content on their handsets



ABOVE Snippets of Genki Rockets' song Heavenly Star are heard throughout *Child Of Eden*. It's effectively the game's theme tune, sung from Lumi's perspective. Genki Rockets' music videos are unlockable extras



Post Script

Interview: Tetsuya Mizuguchi, founder, Q Entertainment

Having worked at Sega for over ten years, designing games such as *Sega Rally Championship*, *Space Channel 5* and *Rez*, **Tetsuya Mizuguchi** (right) went on to found Q Entertainment. The upstart studio's projects began small, with portable titles *Lumines* and *Meteos*, but maintained the creator's fascination with the interplay between audio and visual design. *Every Extend Extra* and *Gunpey* some years later continued Mizuguchi's exploration of the rhythm-action and puzzle genres respectively.

It's Mizuguchi's music project Genki Rockets, however, which provides the strongest through-line to his latest work, both visually and thematically. 'An audiovisual unit produced by Tetsuya Mizuguchi', the group has been shrouded in mystery since their debut. The main 'character' of the group, Lumi (whose lyrics are said to be composed of multiple voices), is central to *Child Of Eden*'s plot, and the lyrics of Genki Rockets' songs relate directly to her plight.

If you still can't get your head around it, our interview with Mizuguchi details his vision and reveals the symbolism behind a shooter that's about giving life, not taking it away.



With the tutorial level, Matrix, were you intentionally putting *Rez* behind you? It feels like a very obvious nod towards that game but also highlights the connection in gameplay and theme with *Child Of Eden*.
In all of our games, you will sense the DNA of our previous work, of the games I've worked on in the past. *Child Of Eden* bears the DNA of Genki Rockets, Lumi and also of *Rez*. But in its own way it's also very different. *Rez* was dark and minimal, while *Child Of Eden* is bright, hopeful, and in the firstperson perspective. *Child Of Eden* has its own persona.

"The most important thing is that people should feel some brightness from completing the game"

You've said in the past that you don't like to think of games in terms of genres. *Child Of Eden* – more than any of your previous games – is difficult to label in a particular genre. How hard was it designing the game in this respect – how did you convey and achieve your vision with the team?
To me, *Child Of Eden* is a music shooter, a synaesthesia shooter. When you have a previous work like *Rez*, it makes it easier to describe some of the things you want to do. Of course, *Child Of Eden* is unique as well, but I had a very great, young artist to help visualise the techno-organic world of Eden. So this was a big help.

Why does the challenge mode have to be unlocked?
There should always be something for people to aspire to. And when you go through a lot of work to create a specific sort of experience, like in *Child Of Eden*, you want people to taste that first before you bring dessert. I think people will really appreciate the challenge mode, especially *Rez* fans.



There's a great sense of power from the simple motion of pushing towards the screen, via Kinect – where did the idea come from?
We always think of many ways to implement new features, and of course we did so with motion control. But with what you're required to do in the game, and considering how Kinect functions, what you experience in the game is the most logical conclusion.

The enemies in the game feel more like nature reacting to your presence – was that the intention?
This isn't supposed to be a violent shooter. You're purifying the corrupted creatures and data. There is danger present, but for example the rapid-fire shot is called the 'Tracer': this was inspired by tracer bullets used in combat to light the way in the darkness. It's our metaphor that the Tracer in *Child Of Eden* lights the way and purifies the creatures corrupted by the darkness.

The game is very heavy with symbolism – what does this imagery mean to you, and how does it relate to Lumi's story?
The things you see in each of the game's Archives are the collected memories and history of the world. So since you're purifying the corrupted data – which takes the form of the things you see in Eden – it makes sense that these elements be based on real-world creatures and objects.

What is the meaning of the photograph sequence at the end of the game?
It's symbolic of having purified Eden; that you can see people's happy memories. Different players will also draw different interpretations from the ending. The most important thing is that people should feel some brightness from completing the game, they should feel uplifted.

The game tells its story through images, sounds and actions rather than scripts or cutscenes – why did you opt for this approach?
Sometimes the best imagery is the kind you create in your mind. Too much imagery can be... too much. *Child Of Eden* is a very visual game, and how you play creates a very unique experience, both visually and aurally. Of course, we created a special opening movie for players to understand what's happening, but once you're past that, the rest is up to you. ■



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Brink

It takes a strong personality to start a revolution, and *Brink* most certainly has that. Its characters have a Gallic eccentricity that makes *Team Fortress 2* look positively normal. Its faction leaders, like-minded men made red and blue by circumstances beyond their control, are dark and conflicted. Its world, The Ark, is an eco-curiosity plucked from the pages of New Scientist. Even the names of avatar customisation parts are enigmatic, while voice types are named after the actors who provided them.

Bethesda is a publisher that bows to the auteur, and this is what it gets for its trouble. A better outcome, certainly, than the staggeringly indulgent *Wet*, but a far-from-straightforward FPS. So many agendas are at play here – for storytelling, art direction, audio design and action – that it takes the mother of them all to keep them in check. And *Brink* has it, proposing nothing less than to right the wrongs of the class-based online shooter. It wants to make playing offline better. It wants to make better online players. It's aiming high.

With two such endeavours under its belt now (*Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* was the first on this scale), Splash Damage has definitively proved that this is easier said than done. Not content with that, it's thrown into *Brink* yet another deadline-smashing aspiration: to right the wrongs of multiplayer movement. The SMART (Smooth Movement Across Random Terrain) system is a context-sensitive parkour ability which turns a run into whatever move the scenery requires. A cynic might say that it's there to give the marketing men something to work with. And you know what? They might be right.

For the videogame PR man, *Brink* is like some Lovecraftian nightmare designed to fry people's brains. "Is it a multiplayer game?" Kinda. "So there's singleplayer?" More 'mingleplayer'. "What's that, then?" Well, it's like multiplayer but you're guaranteed the same experience online or off, even if you're playing alone. "Ah, so multiplayer with bots, then." Not quite. That would be forgetting the story-based maps and objectives. "So there's a campaign I can play with my mates? How long does it last?" Try not to think of it like that. You play the maps in any order, and piece together the story from audio logs and loading screens. A long silence. "What's 'mingleplayer' again?"

This conversation wouldn't have to happen if *Brink* could speak for itself, which it can't. It's not *Call Of Duty* ('point and shoot'), it's not *Left 4 Dead* ('cooperate or die') and it's not even *Battlefield* ('you are hereby ordered to have fun at all costs'). If anything, it's a sermon on deathmatch etiquette which aims to keep bums on seats with a deluge of unlockables. Which isn't to say it's bad so much as faintly unsatisfying and, given the talent involved, somewhat frustrating.

Publisher Bethesda Softworks
Developer Splash Damage
Format 360 (version tested), PC, PS3
Release Out now

bit.ly/iT6dio
Developer interview

The sea levels have risen, dry land passing into myth. It's interesting stuff, but following the plot is a game in itself



Take the story, for instance, of how this beacon of hope The Ark became an Alamo for its makers against a nation of starving refugees. The sea levels have risen, memories of dry land passing into myth. Security and Resistance fight each other, and in between battles fight their doubts. It's interesting stuff, but following the plot is a game in itself. Matches, loading screens, cutscenes and audio logs shuffle it about within two separate campaign threads – one for each faction – which overlap, leapfrog and avoid each other in turns, climaxing with a series of bonus 'what if?' scenarios. No wonder the characters are confused.

You expect, of course, to write your own stories in a multiplayer game, and *Brink* supplies the equipment with four basic classes (Soldier, Medic, Engineer and Operative) and an evolving objective system familiar from *Quake Wars*. Each map is a drama which one team tries to unfold, and the other tries to cut short. Hacking, escorting, bombing and breaching objectives have to be defended for around ten minutes each. Each time they're not, a brief cutscene moves the story to a new part of the map, closer to its conclusion. The escape of a wounded fugitive is one, the destruction of The Ark's founders another.

The player, though, is more likely to remember defusing a bomb with seconds on the clock, their allies falling by their side. Or repairing a turret with their last breath to buy vital seconds for reinforcements. Or cowering in a corner while a weak signal from their hacking device quietly steals victory. Or finding someone with the same idea and blowing their head off. All valid, recurring moments in a game which, once upon a time, let you Taser them in the balls too.

But these moments, like The Ark, can often feel like islands in a sea of trouble. 'Mingleplayer' does work on a fundamental level, using an army of robot stand-ins to ensure 16 'players' in every match. It's arguably created the most coherent online/offline deathmatch experience to date, familiar elements of singleplayer creeping into online play and vice versa. And when it really works, you struggle to tell bot from human and learn not to care. But the rest of the time...

The bots, for one thing, are fatally flawed when teamwork becomes essential. Thanks to a controversial decision to make mission-critical abilities unique to each class – only an Soldier can plant bombs, only a Medic can heal an escort target, etc, though you can hot-swap between them at command points – it takes a balanced and functioning outfit to beat enemies whose sole purpose is to swarm and defend the target. The map design doesn't help, many of the objectives lying in chokepoints which, at the very least, require costly flanking manoeuvres. It ups the challenge in proper online games and drives home the need to communicate, but that just doesn't apply to the bots.





LEFT What you see here is the PC version which, framerate and lag issues aside, looks almost like a completely different game to console, with texture quality and post effects beyond what you'd expect from id Tech 4

The PC iteration's mouse and keyboard controls are a mixed blessing. Superior in speed and precision, they also draw attention to the game's unorthodox movement. Parkour is an acquired taste, and maps more comfortably to a controller. Conversely, though, the benefits of smooth performance and mouse-look far outweigh those of SMART for efficient shooting, even taking into account optional auto-aim and the game's'no one-hit kills' policy



BELOW Spawning within a group is a heavily signposted invitation to buff yourself and allies. This Pavlovian approach to class-based teamwork feels crude, but at least the controls are unobtrusive





Your character adopts the uniform of your chosen side: either Mad Max terrorist chic or police blues with street accessories. The broken promise of a comprehensive character editor means no ladies

Supposedly, they prioritise the needs of the humans in the map. So if you're playing alone and have to plant a bomb, they'll buff, heal and escort you to the waypoint, then guard you as you work. If there are two of you playing co-op, they'll respond to your choice of class and tactics. Only they don't. In a twoplayer co-op session, we swept through the opening missions in a couple of hours and became stuck on the next one for three, our AI-heavy team simply rushing into a hornet's nest while we tried turrets, diversions, heroism and exploits. In the end, the latter got us through.

This is the lie of *Brink*: more often than not, the game *doesn't* make offline deathmatch better, and this by extension makes it a lousy teacher, bringing into question its overbearing progression system. The tragedy of *Brink* is that there's still a decent game in there, doomed to be nothing better.

The progression system and its focus on character generation are powerful in message, less so in execution. Given pride of place beneath the main menu – available even before the menu – your character is presented as the root of the whole experience, able to use in one mode what he learns in another. Playing the game 'right' – buffing allies, using your class's abilities, shooting folks, securing primary and secondary objectives – piles on XP that buys you unique unlockable abilities and appearance parts, making you 'complete'. Apparently there is somewhere in the region of a trillion combinations of mugs, limbs and fashion items, but the art style is so authoritative that you'll always resemble a human Twiglet.

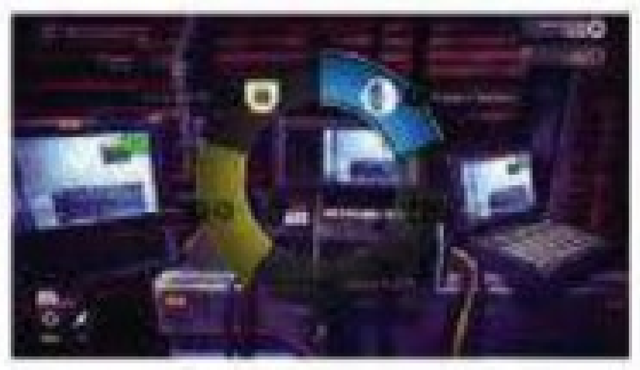
This is a dangerous gambit, and your character levels up so quickly towards a low ceiling that they're done within a few hours. This, the game insists, is to encourage a new character, a new class and a more complete knowledge of a team's requirements, but that only rings half true. What's more likely is that players hooked on epic XP quests will go violently cold turkey, and cry their way back to Papa *COD*.

And much like it can't save Bethesda's PR, SMART doesn't really save *Brink*. It's as bittersweet as the rest of the game. Sprint plus coffee table equals vault; sprint plus wall equals climb; sprint plus certain other objects equals stop and get shot. The Ark's terrain is a bit too random, sadly, for a system that replaces one flawed mechanic (jumping around everywhere) with another. To its credit, though, it does bed you into the world and makes the action less abstract, and more exciting to watch.

Circumstances meant that we had to play *Brink* on 360, which gets a better port than *Quake Wars* but still looks rather sad. Heavily upscaled in places, with texture pop-in issues not quite resolved by a day-one patch, it dulls and smudges the game's strongest asset, its art. The Ark is about bold lines, clean materials and brilliant colours, none of which sit comfortably with id Tech 4 on console.

Brink is not revolution. It might not even be evolution of the kind the FPS needs. If anything, it's an ideas board: a fun enough game in the short term, but more valuable in the long run to better and brighter thieves.

6



WHO GOES THERE?

If not its art design, the best thing about *Brink* is its HUD. While not perfect, it's the only part that really boils its ideas down into a manageable, agreeable format, and without it the game would simply collapse. A big, chunky radial menu keeps you aware of primary and secondary objectives, then seamlessly hands over to in-game markers when you've decided what to do. Things are marked out generally well, in fact, even a life-saving syringe blazing unmistakably from a medic's hand, lighting up a big flashing button on the respawn menu. Controls, furthermore, though split between cheekily named presets ('Duty Calls', 'Green Marine Chief'), are sensibly mapped and seldom confused.

Post Script

Interview: Ed Stern, lead writer and senior game designer, Splash Damage

Writer and designer **Ed Stern** (right) has been with Splash Damage throughout its evolution from modding outfit to id Software henchman to triple-A boutique. *Brink*, its first original IP, has given the company a chance to be truly creative – one it's taken with gusto. With a mixed critical reception and post-launch patches to deal with, Stern's job as communicator is far from over.



***Brink*'s Challenge maps are effectively the tutorial, yet are set aside from the campaign. Why is that?**
It's not like we didn't tell people we're trying to do something different here. One of the defining features of a tutorial is that you never want to do it again. We wanted to create an environment where the players can polish their skills – and that's how you unlock extra weapons. So it's not just a question of grinding, because then you get the issue of two people buying the game on the same day, but one of them gets to play it a lot more and grinds and unlocks some kind of super gun. That's a problem we want to avoid. Here, you have to unlock them with these absolute tests of skill. It's very handy to have this offline practice mode; in fact, the whole game can be an offline practice mode if you want it to be. A lot of it depends on your expectation of *Brink*. And if you try and play it like another game, it's going to be odd and probably frustrating. We put quite a lot of work into preparing people as best we could. We're doing quite a lot of different things. It might be difficult to sum up what we're trying to do in a single phrase.

"One of the elements that's made online shooting problematic is that it's more fun to shoot than to move"

Is summing up the game succinctly more than just a PR issue? Does it benefit how the game functions?
One of the many brilliant things about *Left 4 Dead* is that it tells you how to play it. The whole premise. It's really simple: you shoot the things that are moving. It's a fantastically polished and accomplished game. And the thing that keeps people playing is that cooperative element – the same sort of thing we're reaching for. We know that's the most fun, but how do we make it more accessible? So one of the goals for *Brink* was to just make a game about that – *entirely* about that. So it's always eight-vs-eight and you're never James Bond, so it's always going to be different.

Was *Brink*'s story a bit more linear at any point?
We had to cut our losses accordingly. And also, when the whole thrust of the game is towards mingleplayer, which can be co-op or multiplayer at any point, then that just enforces a certain approach. Also, there's the challenge of making the story there for the people who want it and optional for those who don't.



How necessary was SMART to the game? Was a branding or marketing role involved?
Certainly movement is one of the elements of the shooter. In fact, one of the elements that's made online shooting problematic is that it's more fun to shoot than to move. And one of the goals of *Brink* was to change that. It's not something other games do a lot of, so it's a unique selling point, and it looks kind of spectacular. So it's not surprising that it's strongly represented in the marketing for it. But I don't think anyone would have looked at the marketing and gone: "Look, a free-running game! Hang on, what are these guns doing here?"

Pushing the genre on so many fronts must require a lot of forethought and planning.
Games that are easy to describe aren't necessarily easier to make. I don't think there's any correlation there. It was more of a challenge for *Brink* because online shooters are so enormously popular and are all kind of the same. *Battlefield* and *Call Of Duty* are really good at what they do; we really wanted to do something different. Occasionally you get people who are clearly outraged and betrayed by this.

Who will you be listening to as you patch the game from here?
You listen to everyone, and also you look at your stats very carefully. And there are some things you can just do better, such as the network bandwidth conundrum, because there's no way of simulating and testing something so enormous. We had a closed beta but that was limited in size and scope. So there's been an issue of network providers just running too many instances of the game per server. We can make the entire game more efficient, but there's not much we can do other than ask them not to do that. It's not really fixable.

There are some things we can fix and tune and balance, and we can push those out very quickly. Clearly there's been some issues with ATI cards and that's enormously frustrating: you've bought the game and it doesn't run properly. That's not your fault, and it's one of the brilliant and maddening things about the PC as a development platform. There is no such thing. It's just a box, and you've got no idea what people have got in there. So hopefully we can fix that *very* quickly.

Should people expect many more visual upgrades on the console version?
Oh, absolutely. We're going to keep working on that game. Sometimes it sounds almost suspicious when you say you're going to "patch" the game, as if people were sold something shoddy. Whenever we can make the game better, we shall do so. ■

The Witcher 2: Assassins Of Kings

Did anyone tell Polish developer CD Projekt to stop making roleplaying games about a scarred old man in leather trousers? If so, it was in vain. *The Witcher 2* is unapologetically faithful to the 2007 original and its hoary protagonist, eager depiction of sex, and morally bleak fantasy world.

The studio did, however, appear to take some notes: *The Witcher 2* hasn't had any dialogue hacked out of it at the last minute, there are no obvious mistranslations, and you're not rewarded for bedding women with a sad collectible card of their breasts. A new engine shows a much more sumptuous world, but at the expense of performance on middling PCs.

The obstacles between you and the fascinating RPG CD Projekt keeps threatening to make are fewer and more forgivable. But the game is still agonisingly slow to get to the good stuff, and its remaining problems are at their worst during the least interesting content.

The opening three hours are spent establishing the character of King Foltest in flashbacks, a device which is necessary for the reason establishing him isn't: he's dead. His traits – a man of the people, experienced soldier and philanderer – are illustrated at the expense of giving the player anything more interesting to do than a string of irrelevant fights and QTEs.

It also establishes the main frustrations that'll be accompanying you throughout. The revised combat system is a standard combination of light and heavy attacks, dodges and blocks, but any convenience that simplicity might have offered is crippled by a maddeningly erratic targeting system. In a game where your target determines which direction you'll dive when you dodge, or leap when you attack, being unable to switch to the right enemy is often fatal.

It's exacerbated by the strange decision to lock off all combat conveniences for the first eight levels or so. Your sword won't damage enemies it passes through, except the targeted one, until you're allowed to buy that ability with a talent point. You can block only a couple of times per fight until you can upgrade your Vigor stat. You take devastating damage from rear attacks until you access a trait that reduces it, which would be fair if your orientation wasn't at the mercy of the targeting system.

When the combat is hard, it's primarily for usability reasons. Once you're allowed to fix it through new talents, it becomes almost trivial. It's reasonably satisfying to watch, and spells, bombs and traps add some worthwhile twists, but for an RPG that doesn't let you choose a class, it's conspicuous that the one you're stuck with never really gets interesting.

The game has trouble determining exactly when combat has ended, and you can't interact with anything until it has. Every fight is followed by an awkward five seconds in which doors won't open, bodies can't be looted, quest objectives can't be completed, and the game can't be saved. When the door in question is to a burning building, and the objective is to rescue the innocents inside, the irritation becomes an absurdity.

One reason you can't perform any of these actions during combat is the game's needless insistence on using the left mouse button for almost every interaction. It relies heavily on context-sensitivity, which would be inadequate even if it had been implemented well. Instead, it becomes almost impossible to search bodies when companions you can talk to are following close by, you're forever lighting torches instead of performing critical actions, and left-clicking a bound hostage in a burning building can cause you to descend a ladder into the inferno.

Publisher CD Projekt
Developer In-house
Format PC
Release Out now

bit.ly/l9DV7i
Developer interview

Even during the early quests, The Witcher 2 often alludes to a complex world beyond your current concerns



At the first city hub, three hours in, the game finally opens up structurally. If it hit its stride at this point, plunging into the complexity of its world politics, presenting you with genuinely tough decisions and altering its course in response to those you've made, *The Witcher 2* would be easy to recommend. It does all these things, but not for a further five hours. The story the game's spent three hours prefacing is put on hold for a long, irrelevant quest to slay a sea monster that's terrorising the town. The side-quests are better, but still contribute to a huge delay in getting back to the main arc. The stalling culminates in an arduous, clumsy and poorly communicated boss fight, with no checkpoints or ability to save, and then you're done. You've passed *The Witcher 2*'s eight-hour entrance exam and may now proceed to the substance of the game.

The first decision you make after that point has extraordinarily far-reaching consequences. The next act is set in a starkly different place, and its much shorter introduction of the key players is actually important to the rest of the plot. Even during the early quests, *The Witcher 2* alludes to a complex world beyond your current concerns. The game thereafter brings it to the fore, draws you into its intricacies, and even finds intelligent ways to make its history relevant. The decisions you have to make are difficult, but for ethical reasons rather than lack of guidance, and the game delights in making good on them, rarely flinching from showing the gravity of their consequences. If it started this strongly, or got to anything as engaging inside four hours, its rough edges would seem minor.

Whether *The Witcher 2* is worthwhile despite its dull first act depends on whether or not its central fantasy is one you can engage with. Rather than creating a character, you're stuck as the brooding, white-haired monster slayer Geralt. Anyone who enjoyed the role last time will be happy to bear with him while the game meanders to its point. Anyone else will need an extraordinary level of patience.

6



ABOVE In-game, combat isn't quite as elegant as the cinematics suggest. There's a clumsy sense of being locked into an animation until it completes, particularly when trying to change targets. **RIGHT** Your perspective on the second act is influenced strongly by a decision made at the end of the first. Other consequences will take longer to play out



BELOW The combat system makes it easy to lock on to your target, but too difficult to switch to a new one mid-fight. When you're not locked, your target might change to something irrelevant at any time





ABOVE Where *The Witcher* used BioWare's *Neverwinter Nights* engine, CD Projekt has built its own for *Assassins Of Kings*. It's an attractive piece of tech, but the game does crash every few hours, and rarely autosaves



Romance scenes are made disturbing by Geralt's scarred body. He occasionally looks fit to burst open mid-coitus

Post Script

Does The Witcher 2 inherit the original's controversial attitudes to gender and sex?

The Witcher was a story-driven game with chunks of dialogue mistranslated or missing, and yet that wasn't the most common complaint. The more contentious point was its treatment of women.

The criticisms were numerous, and mostly well founded. That many female characters seemed to have crucial parts of their clothing missing is not unusual in fantasy games, but the sheer number of similar, revealingly dressed female characters was.

More tellingly, 28 different women were eager to sleep with you. Most would do so in response to the obvious dialogue option; others required you to fetch them trinkets first. The transition from greeting to orgasmic moans was often handled with the character and nuance of a porn flick. You'd have to watch porn for the game's duration to see as many different women bedded. It's not much more flattering to the strength of the female characters if you assume that your species and profession – witcher – made you rather more attractive than your rather weasly character model would suggest.

The most visible grounds for the sexism accusations, though, were the cards, which were little more than painted portraits, not always explicit, of the character you had just slept with. However, the way the game awarded them to you, and stored them in your journal, made them feel like trophies. By both resembling collectors' cards and being collectible, they seemed to incentivise serial womanising and the perception of female characters as potential possessions.

The Witcher 2 has done away with them completely. It's simultaneously more explicit and less offensive. The cards would previously appear over an ambiguous representation of sex, but *The Witcher 2* has neither the cards nor the ambiguity. Sex scenes are depicted extensively in-game and in-engine – not in their entirety, but certainly in more overt detail than in BioWare's games.

All of which would bring it closer to a thinly veiled porn title if it inherited *The Witcher*'s queue of women jumping at the chance to sleep with you, but potential romances are more realistically few and far between. You begin the game with a lover, Triss, and the game largely assumes you want to stay with her. In fact, the only characters reminiscent of *The Witcher*'s many loose women are the prostitutes at the local tavern. Later, the game has smarter ways of showing that sex is a part of its world without throwing willing women at you.

It's still set in a sexist environment: when Triss insists on accompanying you and another character on an excursion, your male companion makes the bizarre logical leap to: "That time of the month, eh?" But that's a very different thing to a game with sexism built in to its depiction of females. You don't have to play for long to meet a woman who isn't attracted to your character, nor to meet a strong and self-determined one. A sexist world is one where these characters struggle; a sexist game is one in which they don't exist.

That said, it's conspicuous that most of these strong female characters have a habit of being rendered helpless shortly after they appear. The first time Triss uses her magic to help you in combat, she faints. She then spends much of the game waiting for you in pubs or getting kidnapped. A stronger female character falls ill shortly after meeting you, and relies on you to save her.

It could be perceived as a milder level of endemic sexism, but the truth is probably simpler. No dominant character goes unscuppered for long in a fantasy storyline. Your male companions spend just as much time being idle and useless and player agency dictates that everyone must need your help.

Only the player is exempt from these rules, and if casting you as a male is *The Witcher 2*'s biggest gender issue, it's a dramatic improvement. ■



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TEAM SONIC
20



エッグマン

El Shaddai: Ascension Of The Metatron

So *El Shaddai* is based on the Book of Enoch, a bit of antediluvian religious esoterica that outlines the revelations of Noah's great grandfather. But this is hardly Sunday School stuff. *El Shaddai* presents Bible stories by way of hippie psychedelia, French sci-fi, Japanese anime and videogame oddity. It takes the original and filters it through a kaleidoscope of pop-culture influences that seemingly range far and wide: everything from Ulysses 31 to Les Maitres du Temps; Zardoz to the conclusion of 2001: A Space Odyssey; *Bayonetta*, *Okami*, *Paper Mario* and more.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the story as filtered through that shimmering lens is the sort of unintelligible, overcomplicated errant nonsense familiar to anyone who's watched any anime (or indeed anybody who's read any major religious texts or associated apocrypha). A rather loose take on the source material, it has Enoch looking suitably golden-haired and surprisingly beach-buff for a bookworm – not to mention the fetching pair of Edwin jeans beneath his celestial armour. He's sent to defeat a coterie of fallen angels to prevent a great flood from destroying humanity (which, to be fair, is *sort of* like the original). Much of the narrative, however, takes place in the background and between scenes, compressing celestial timespans into a few moments and spewing forth so many complicated names that it can be easier just to ignore them and the story altogether in favour of getting to grips with the action.

And what action. Even the opening credits are bursting with a joyful playfulness: as you scroll along the bottom of the screen fighting scratchy silhouetted beetle-backed stick figures, watercolour scenes fade in and out of the background to recount the story so far; momiji maple leaves scatter and fall across the screen; and the credits roll, complete with illuminated capitals, before Enoch finally falls between giant glowing Hebrew(ish) lettering to meet the game's first challenge.

Prismatic and constantly shifting, it's a difficult game to pin down. One moment it's full of organic, alien landscapes, all climbing towers and abstract shapes; the next it dissolves into great vistas of nothingness. Stark stone escarpments are given a choral accompaniment; later, abstract pathways are lit up in disco neon by fireworks that explode and fall in the background, with electronic music to match. You'll find yourself running through strange, spacey tunnels before switching to *Paper Mario* worlds of big, blocky, colourful 2D platforming populated by *Noby Noby Boy* Nephilim wobbling, bending and bouncing about the place before swallowing Enoch whole to deposit him intact at his next challenge (or even eating each other to mutate into a giant tentacled horror).

Some 2D platforming sections are simple strolls across huge stained glass windows that depict angelic hierarchies or recount prelapsarian history; others

Publisher UTV Ignition Entertainment
Developer In-house
Format 360, PS3 (version tested)
Release Out now (Japan), TBC (UK, US)

Abstract paths are lit up in disco neon by fireworks that explode and fall, with electronic music to match

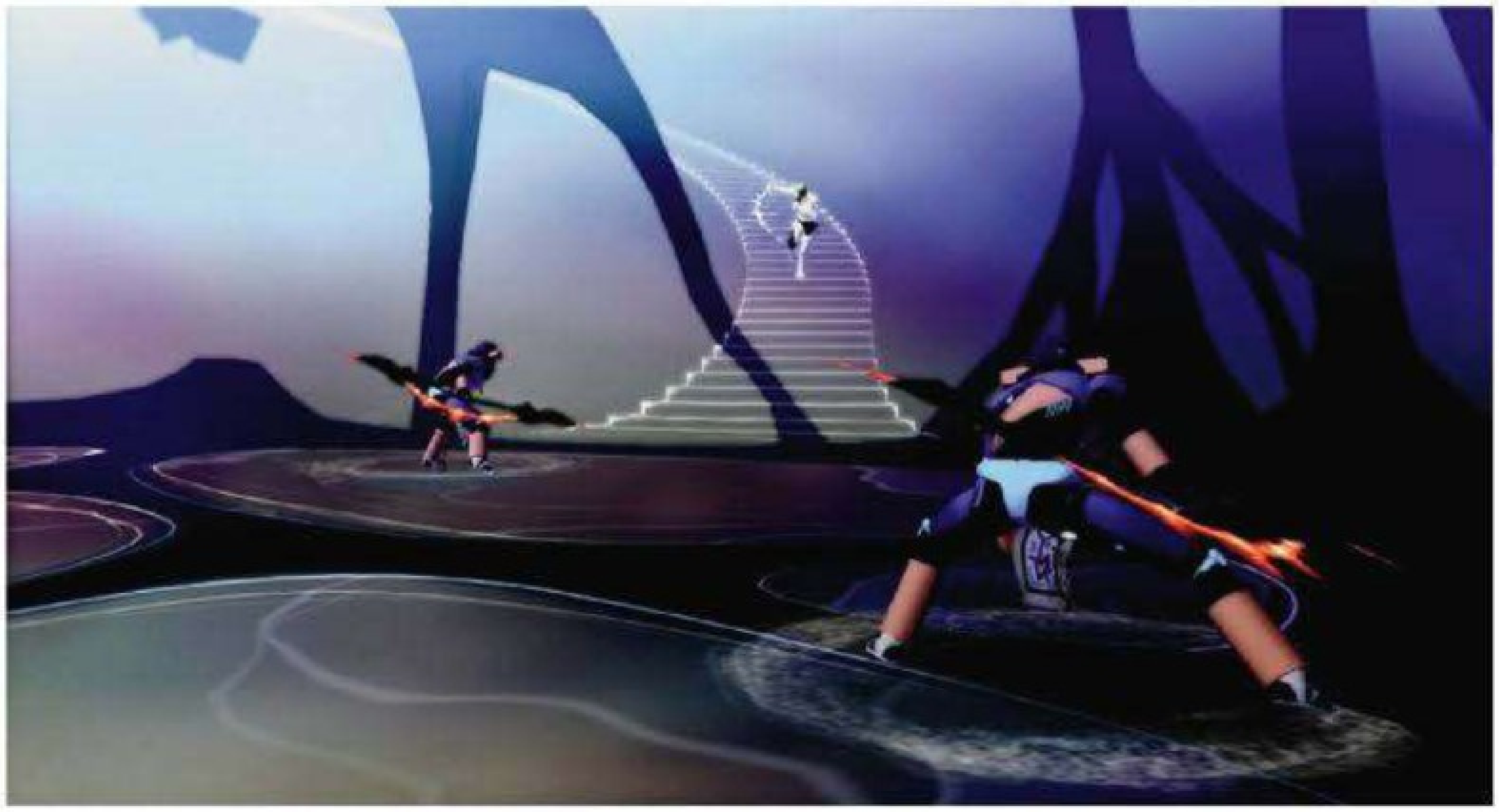


require pixel-perfect progress across rocky outcrops above surging waves, or rickety stonework that threads its way through seas of flame. There are fiendish jumps and geometric puzzles, and always the lighting and colourwork is constantly shifting and iridescent, marbling and warping across the screen, taking in all sorts of different traditions in design and animation, from stop-motion cartoons to *LocoRoco*.

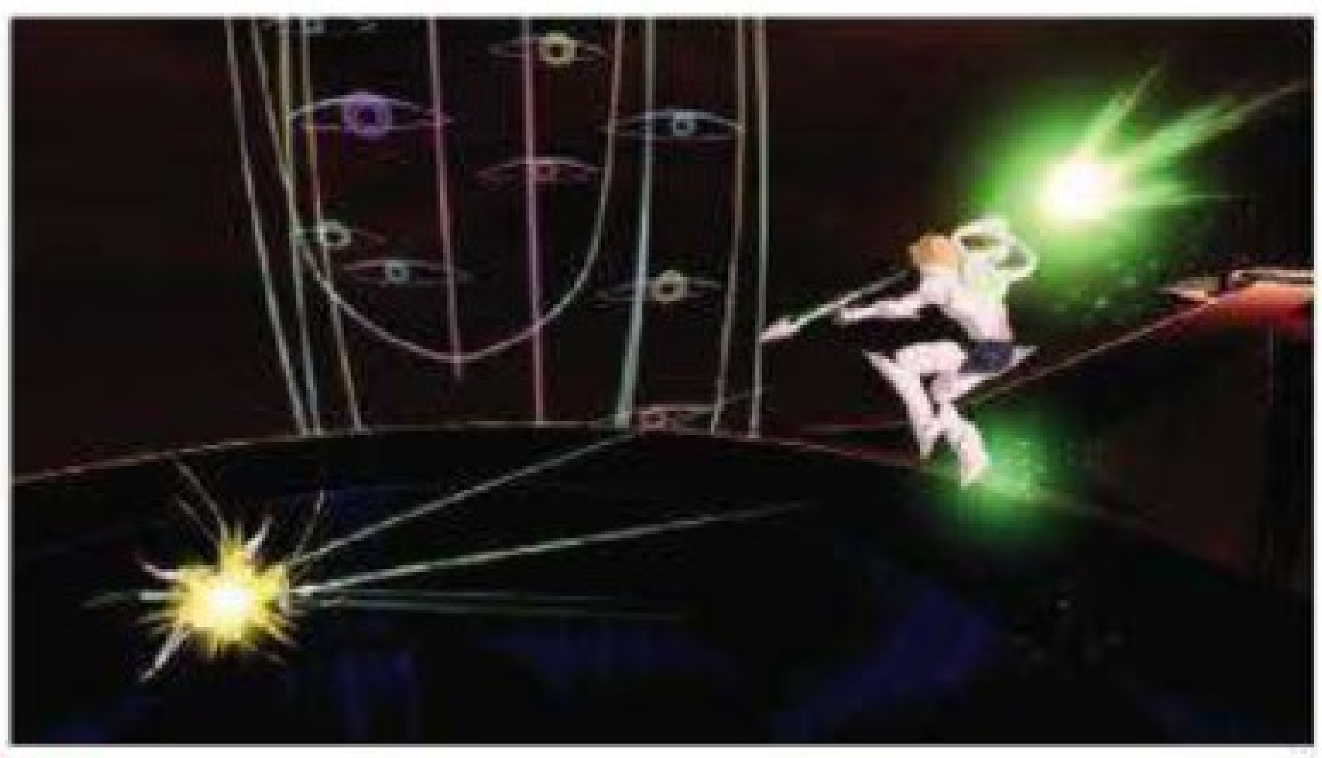
Stepping into three dimensions, the game roams from robotic Blade Runner cityscapes to *Okami*-style sylvan forests. Brush lines drift across the screen, the marble swirls and tie-dye patterns persist, and stark colour filters lend an air of strangeness. Cubist harlequins pelt you from atop spikes, while tribally dressed enemies and angry assailants warp in to prevent your progress. And at every turn those fallen angels fizzle into view to present a sterner test of your mettle, occasionally morphing into monstrous oddities – manta ray bat things, or giant jellyfish.

But what do you actually do in *El Shaddai*? Well, given the layered strangeness and multi-hued weirdness, it's almost disappointing to find that mostly what you do is fight and jump, as you would in a million other games. The complexity, it turns out, is only cosmetic; the depth merely presentational. Compared to similar action titles such as *Bayonetta* or *Devil May Cry*, combat feels simple and repetitive. There are no lengthy combo chains here, or complicated topographies to negotiate; just a choice of three weapons, almost always in a fairly straightforward circular arena. The weapons offer some strategic possibilities – Gale substitutes speed for defence, blitzing the basic melee attacks enabled by Arch, but it generally loses out to the heavy armour and upgraded pummel power of Veil. And choosing the right weapon at the right time is the key to taking out the bosses – though you can't switch between them freely, instead having to wait until they're dropped by an enemy or deposited by a helpful wisp.

But that's about as far as it goes, so although the game gives you the opportunity to replay and rank up, the shallowness of the combat mechanics leave little motivation to do so. But that's not really the point of *El Shaddai*. This is not so much a game like *Bayonetta*, all about interrupt combos or intricate brawling, as it is an experiential voyage from the same school of strangeness that produced *Catherine*. Indeed, it contains a similar blend of metaphysical narrative and old-school game rules – and if the combat ever feels simplistic, it's easy to overlook it amid the joy of exploring these amazing worlds. Like a kaleidoscope, *El Shaddai* offers a constant variety – sometimes confusing and out of focus, but often sparkling brilliantly. So long as you're not looking for any deeper meaning, you'll find plenty of novelty and beauty here, if not quite an eternity. **8**



LEFT If the screenshots leave you underwhelmed, then perhaps you'd be better off giving *El Shaddai* a miss; the game's art style is one of its great strengths, granting it an endless variety and a perpetual sense of newness. **BELOW** This is Nanna, riding her pet Nephilim. She's a member of the 'free people', humans who are opposed to the fallen Grigori angels. Throughout the game they'll provide you with notes to help explain what's going on



ABOVE If you compare it to the likes of *Bayonetta* or *Devil May Cry*, the combat feels a little bit simplistic and repetitive. But there's enough going on here to keep you interested beyond the combo chains and power-ups





Platforming sections take place in both two and three dimensions, and although it does get progressively trickier as the game goes on, it never becomes difficult to the point of being frustrating

Dirt 3

Race driver Ken Block has a voice for mime, in the same way that Howard Stern has a face for radio. Or at least he does when he's introducing Gymkhana, rally's YouTube-friendly answer to equestrian show jumping. He sounds like Nicolas Cage with a hangover, droning on in such a way that if you accidentally knocked the sound off, you'd assume he'd fallen asleep. He is, however, the most important character to date in *Dirt*, Codemasters' grand foreign exchange experiment with the *Colin McRae* franchise.

It's been a provocative ride, this trilogy. During our most recent visit to its UK-based creator, the taxi driver remarked: "I stopped caring when they went all American." A true story, and a common indictment of *Dirt*'s necessary evil. The extreme sports branding, the battle racing, the fear of an imminent "Dude!" around every corner: it's turned a local hero into a global, recession-proof superstar.

There's a lot more traditional rally in *Dirt 3*, for sure – a lot more everything, in fact – but it's still not a *Colin McRae* game. There's a lot more history in it, too, with cars dating back to the '60s Mini Cooper S, darling of the Monte Carlo Rally; but it's modern, full of references to YouTube and online fans. It's serious and zany. Eurosport and MTV.

This time around, though, the pressure of those opposing forces has crafted a jewel in its centre. Gymkhana, a sandbox stunt mode pitched as the 'ultimate in self-expression', really isn't far off the mark. In playgrounds made of lampposts, ramps, exploding blocks and stunt scenery, you rock and roll the cars until everything but the wheels falls off. Codemasters' engine, bound by four years of strait-laced games, is finally unleashed.

Staged at places such as the sprawling DC Compound at Battersea Power Station and the LA Coliseum, Gymkhana takes many forms. Single- and multiplayer dashes to crush cardboard cutouts of a robot are probably the weirdest, with others including checkpoint races and speed runs. Its true identity, though, is the freestyle score attack that covers donuts, drifts, jumps and trips through the tyre-shredding spin dryer. Mix up tricks for a multiplier, repeat and they go stale; you know the drill. The game doesn't just spring to life in these modes, it parties hard.

More than snow, rain, Finland or Kenya, Gymkhana is *Dirt*'s pinnacle, because it heals the rift between target audiences. During the preceding run of venues and race types, things are actually touch-and-go. The jovial banter between British and American announcers makes James Franco and Anne Hathaway look like seasoned raconteurs. The series' trademark colour-grading and bloom – affectionately dubbed "the piss filter" in some circles – are back in varying degrees.

Publisher Codemasters
Developer In-house
Format 360, PS3 (version tested), PC
Release Out now

You won't find a more tactile and likeable arcade handling model, even if the AI lacks the fight of Race Driver: Grid's



STRICTLY ON THE DOWNLOAD
Codemasters has been surprisingly lax with post-launch support in the past, most of its racers enjoying little more than a few downloadable cars and an angrily awaited patch or two. *Dirt 3* has other plans. Its DLC option takes pride of place in the 'My Dirt' section, while a nag screen and dedicated menu speak of VIP pass rewards such as YouTube uploading, extra cars and the significant bonus of online play. None of which guarantees much more, of course, so we'll have to take the publisher's word on that. The first DLC pack, it says, will be a Monte Carlo Rally pack featuring eight stages for single- and multiplayer modes.

Worse, though, faux-CinemaScope borders have been applied to the UI and replays, meaning that much of the game isn't even running fullscreen.

Even when they're ditching the paddocks from *Dirt 2*, shortening the transitions and quickening the menus, the UI engineers can't help themselves. To their credit, the Triforce-themed frontend is a gorgeous flashback to simpler *McRaes*. But why can we still not skip or disable the umpteen tutorial videos? Or silence the inane post-race commentary? Or watch a replay without watermarks? Or take photos rather than upload to YouTube? The game has a 'My Dirt' menu option for settings such as navigator complexity and car horn, but pays mere lip service to really owning the experience.

The Dirt Tour career mode is a something of a smorgasbord, with so many flavours of race that there's little overarching feel to it all. But given the hearty, well-prepared portions – nine-class Rally, high-speed Trailblazers, head-to-head Rallycross, truck and buggy Landrushes, and the aforementioned Gymkhana – most will agree that's a good thing.

Visits to Aspen, Michigan, Norway and elsewhere aren't in themselves the biggest change to the Tour. It's more the range of events available at each stop, and the attempts by various circuits to appease the Euro crowd while evoking hallowed names such as *RalliSport Challenge 2*. Even the unlikely Michigan Smelter has a sodden, deciduous quality that brings it in line with the Nordic routes, while the LA Coliseum has a Roman glow. The Rallycross events are brilliant throughout, calibrated to keep equally matched drivers parallel and in sight of each other at all the right moments.

And actually, once you're out of the menus and throwing up dust, you'll remember that *Dirt* is all feel at its core. You won't find a more tactile and likeable arcade handling model, even if the AI lacks the fight of *Race Driver: Grid*'s.

There's no point wasting words on how great *Dirt 3* looks. Occasional bloom crimes aside, its art and technology are still running parallel, which – when you're talking about the ever-evolving Ego engine – speaks for itself. Suffice it to say there isn't a time, place or condition that doesn't look magnificent. Nor does much need to be said about its audio beyond the purposefully global choice of music.

But it's not enough to say that Codemasters has simply done it again. The story here is Block, who by introducing Gymkhana becomes the acceptable face of Americanisation. With help from much-appreciated splitscreen support, his freestyle events take multiplayer, especially, to places previous *Dirts* only dreamt of. At best, they remind us who gave us *Micro Machines*. A vast, almost encyclopaedic look at the united nations of rally, *Dirt 3* doesn't feel definitive *despite* America – it wouldn't feel definitive without it.

9



ABOVE The weakest of the Gymkhana modes is arguably Battle, a speed run that has you fill a quota of stunts without properly telling you where and what they are until you're practically on top of them







TOP Light, shadow and cockpit: all noticeably improved even on console, though the PC is the inevitable trailblazer. Whichever version you choose, the benefits of a wheel have similarly increased. Transitions to asphalt are sublime. ABOVE With so many tracks, conditions and event types spread across a respectable number of venues, there's enough to keep the surprises coming throughout the Tour, as races are more enthralling with every unlocked branch. LEFT Flashbacks are back to rescue you from any singleplayer mishap, with a simple scoring system discouraging their use. Points are also awarded for race position and bonus objectives, moving you elegantly through the career mode

Bangai-O HD: Missile Fury

Nearly hidden among thousands of missiles is the newfound refinement in *Bangai-O HD*, the eponymous giant robot's third outing. While its DS predecessor *Bangai-O Spirits* blew the series' doors wide open – offering customisable loadouts and more than 100 levels that could be skipped or solved – this XBLA version sees Treasure opting for a more tightly controlled, if equally ludicrous, experience. Under constraint, the game's breadth and strangeness shine, and the distance *Bangai-O* has kept from other bullet-hell titles feels like a yawning chasm.

At heart, this is a game built around a mean joke. Your object is simple – destroy the enemies – but your path there is convoluted. Although *Bangai-O* is known to be a high-powered weapon of mass destruction, it's merely a speck onscreen, dwarfed by war machines up to 20 times its size. Enter a new level and it's game over seconds later, at the hands of a volley of missiles or crisscrossing laser beams. *Bangai-O HD* introduces punchlines to this tragicomedy: defeat the boss at the end of a winding tunnel, only to be jumped from behind by two robots; slay a giant ant and be met by a swarm of its spawn that fills your screen like flakes in a deadly snow globe. Meanwhile, you've lost the ability to pick your weapons, so each level is built for a given loadout of missiles, bouncing bullets or napalm. Because the game rests upon split-second decisions, these action-packed levels have a puzzle-like centre. Your basic techniques seem arcane, but grow familiar by force of necessity: using counter-attacks to overwhelm enemy fire, dashing into foes to stun them and gathering fruit to recharge your EX meter. Throughout *Bangai-O HD*, it's a question of where and when.

Levels may be skipped only after you've failed three times, so must be experienced in order. In guiding the flow of destruction, Treasure joyfully points out all the things its creation can be. You crawl through an interstellar dungeon. You nudge blocks amid a hellfire of munitions. You play cat-and-mouse with tanks, picking them off while avoiding their lines of sight. You inch tensely through a level that consists almost entirely of enemies stacked atop each other, and try not to upset too many of them. In between, you dodge and counter waves of ferocious missiles that would put *Gunbuster* to shame. *Bangai-O HD* reveals that the series can be both a chaotic toy box and a lattice of fantastical set-pieces that unfold meaningfully. Of all games, it best resembles *Super Meat Boy* in how its pieces interlock and prop up a world of complexity – one in which death awaits at the earliest slip-up and the thrill of winning is palpably real.

8

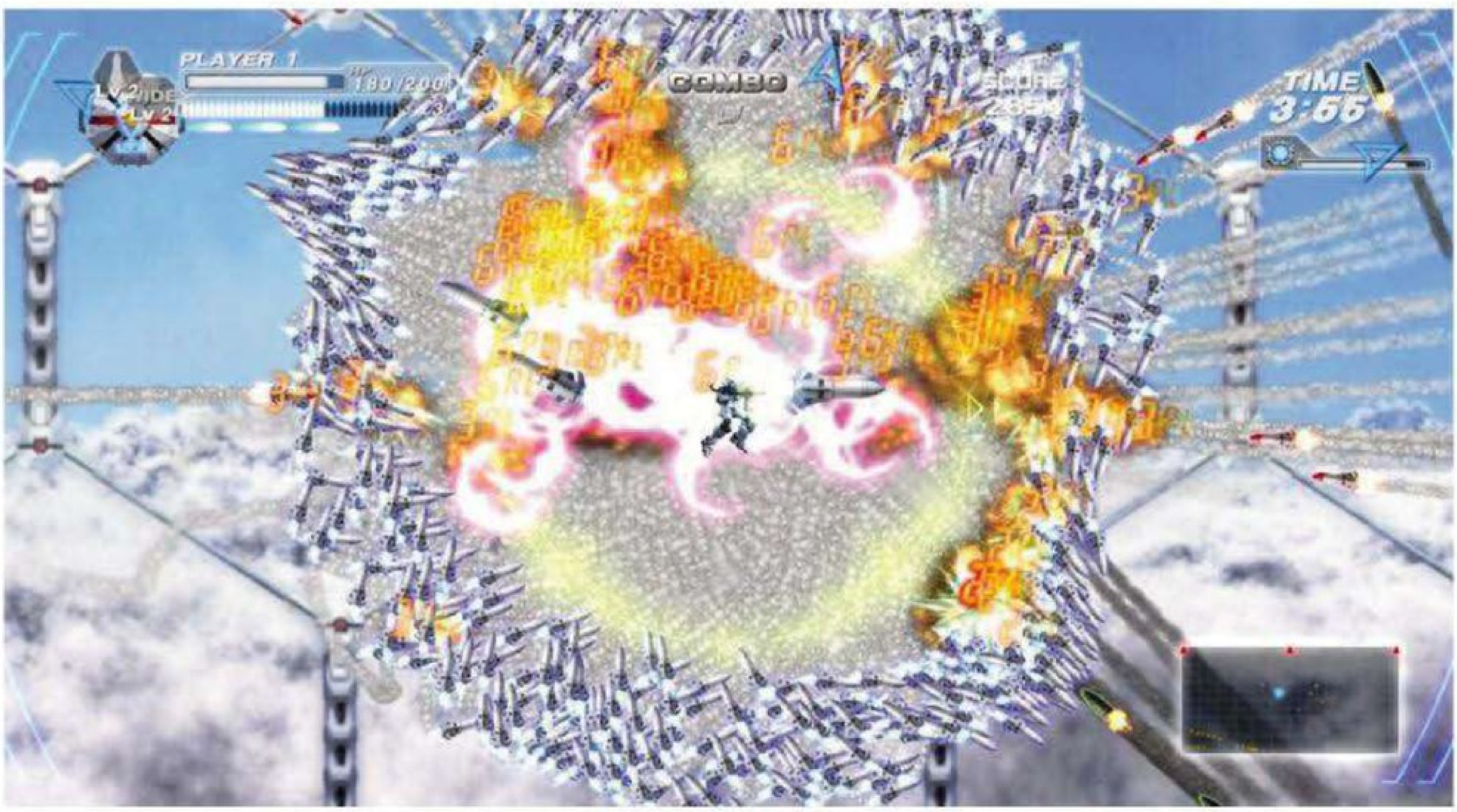
Publisher D3 Publisher
Developer Treasure
Format 360
Release Out now



THE PLOT THINS OUT

Despite introducing online co-op and an intimidating adversary in Longai-O, this game has the thinnest backstory yet. Each level is prefaced by Dr Ban, here an advisor who offers the winning strategies ("Don't miss the item that will appear" and "Watch out for ninjas"), knowing they are easier said than done. The original game's surreal anime plot was even more odd than the gameplay itself, and is sorely missed here. *Bangai-O HD* tells a fine story through its level progression, but it's less memorable without the faces and cheerleading of the mech's pilots.

Something like 5,000 projectiles can appear simultaneously, while your mech's own missiles expand when you are close to enemy fire. At the height of the game, you locate yourself by the outward ripple of explosions



Dead Or Alive: Dimensions

For the first hour of *Dead Or Alive: Dimensions'* Chronicle, or story mode, you wonder whether, free from the well-known fixations of departed creator Tomonobu Itagaki, Team Ninja has toned down the elements for which the series is famous. By the end of the second chapter, however, you've seen La Mariposa in the shower and lingering shots of Kasumi's cleavage and underwear. Itagaki left Tecmo Koei almost three years ago, yet his influence clearly remains.

Chronicle mode stitches together the stories from previous games in the series, switching characters as the narrative dictates, and also functions as an elegant introduction to the game's mechanics. Early fights focus on individual aspects of the combat system with the enemy AI tooled accordingly. Difficulty has been significantly toned down from *DOA4*, and the input windows for counters, tightened for the 2005 360 release, have been widened again here, creating an enjoyable, accessible fighting game that appeals to old and new hands alike. Chronicle mode poses little challenge for the four or so hours it takes to re-tell the story from previous games in the series, and arcade mode, too, is largely a breeze. While lower difficulty largely makes for fuss-free portable play, *Dimensions* is not without its harder moments, and it is here that the cracks begin to show. During tougher Tag Challenge moments, the AI counters with such regularity that you suspect your inputs are being read.

That aside, *Dimensions'* action is a fine fit for 3DS. The extra depth is arresting – combatants plunge from one part of a stage to the next, crashing through glass and tumbling down stairs. While its 3D arenas arguably make for a more fitting showcase of 3DS's capabilities than launch title *Super Street Fighter IV 3D Edition*, the two share a further thrill as you turn the 3D off and watch the framerate double.

Capcom's quartering of the 3DS touchscreen – allowing for user-defined short cuts to special moves – cannot be replicated in this, a game without projectiles or super combos. Instead, Team Ninja has placed a character's entire movelist on the lower screen, making not only for a reference guide that scrolls three or four screens deep but also a cheerfully accessible fighter that is surprisingly functional – albeit at a basic level – using the stylus. Strings of attacks can be performed with a single tap of the screen, the context-sensitive display switching to show wake-up or counter options as the action demands.

While Itagaki's influence lingers in places, then, it appears that Team Ninja's relationship with players is no longer as abusive as in years past.

7

Costumes range from fairly normal to more suitable for a cocktail party in a sex dungeon. There are just four per character in singleplayer, with more promised through SpotPass. Multiplayer is available locally and over Wi-Fi

Publisher Tecmo Koei
Developer Team Ninja
Format 3DS
Release Out now

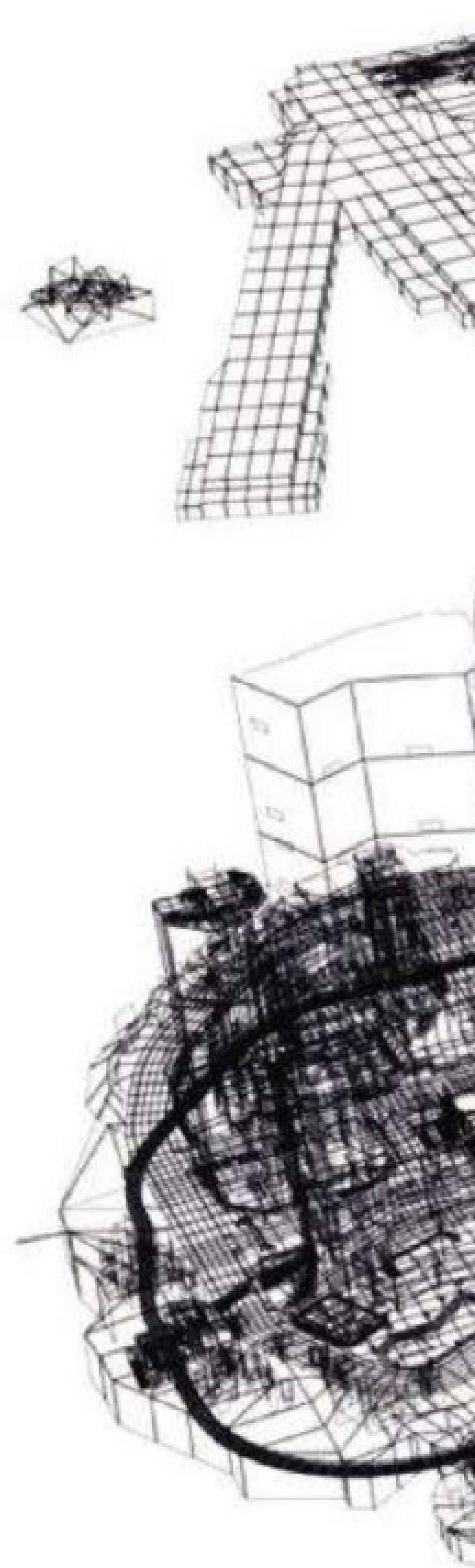


UNLOCKABLE COMBO
Players are constantly rewarded with unlockables, especially early on, when characters and costumes follow nearly every bout. The most common are figurines for use in Showcase mode, where character figurines can be posed on any of the game's stages, players panning the camera around by moving the 3DS itself, photos saved to an SD card with a click of the right trigger. With 999 figurines available, it will take some time to find them all, but a baffling inability to place more than one onscreen at once renders it all largely pointless.



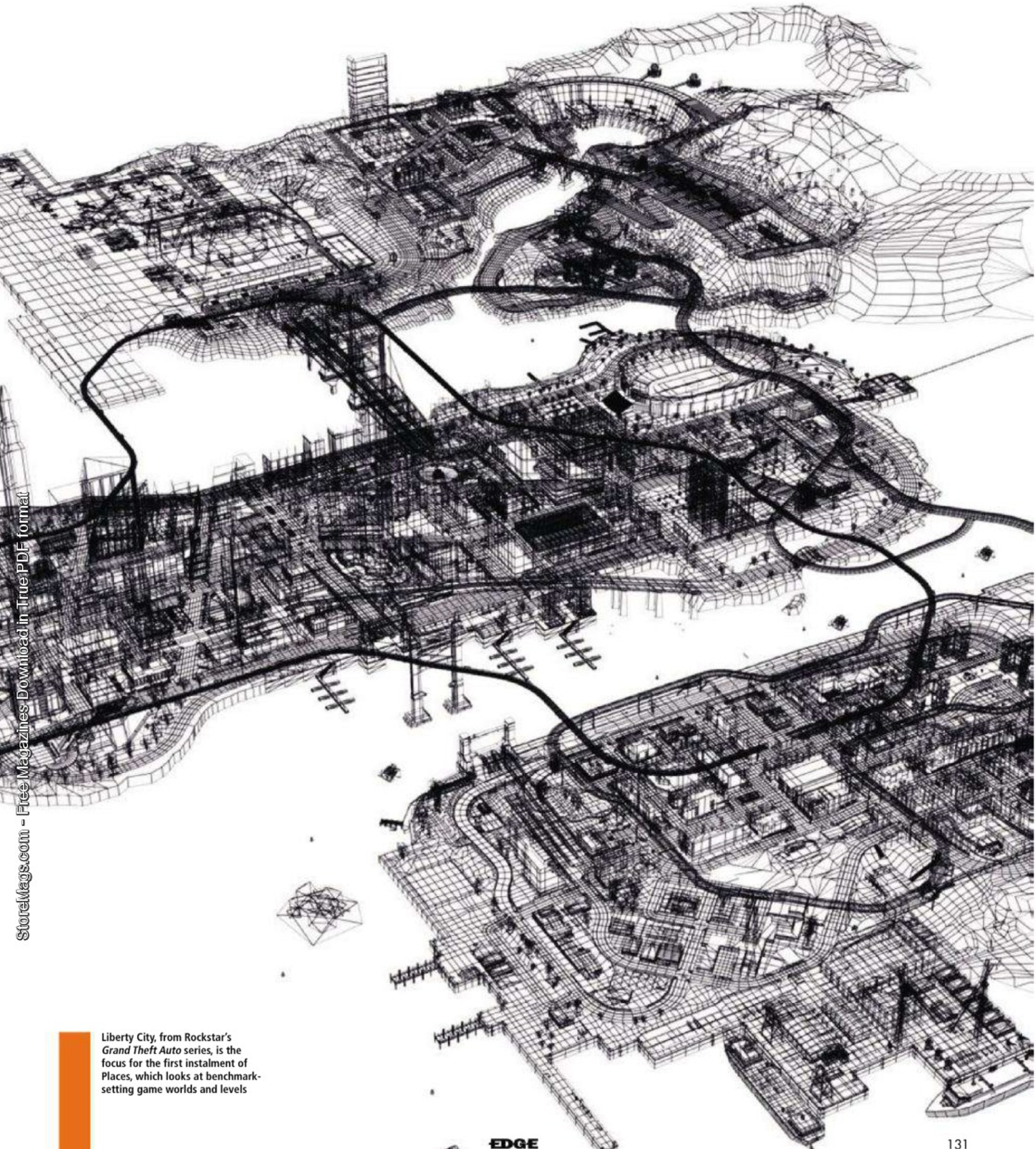
create

Lifting the lid on the art, science and business of making games



Welcome to the section in **Edge** which celebrates the inner workings of the gaming world. Within these pages you'll find the debut triumvirate of People, Places, Things in which we talk to Bennett Foddy (p132) about the inspiration behind cult favourites *QWOP* and *GIRP*, return to the streets of Liberty City (p134) to consider what makes it such a consistently engaging and often startling environment, and capture a handful of Mario's golden coins (p136) in a bid to identify what makes a perfect videogame collectible. This issue's Studio Profile (p138) involves a visit to Q-Games in Kyoto, responsible for the likes of *Starfox Command* and a long list of charismatic and innovative games, including the *PixelJunk* series. Create is also the new home of our legendary The Making Of... series, which this issue focuses on the game that paved the way for the *Call Of Duty* series. *Medal Of Honor* (p144) may be somewhat overshadowed today by Activision's sales numbers, but as our story explains, developer Dreamworks Interactive's 1999 PS1 game deserves saluting. In a feature entitled Export Strengths (p148) we take a look at how the issue of game localisation has evolved to encapsulate culturalisation, and how Hello Games went about shipping *Joe Danger* to Japan. Finally, as well being home to established **Edge** industry columnists Clint Hocking (p154) of LucasArts and Randy Smith (p156) of indie developer Tiger Style, Create also welcomes the arrival of James Leach (p158), who joins the **Edge** fold to talk about the craft of writing in games.

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The business section of **Edge**'s Web site



Liberty City, from Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto* series, is the focus for the first instalment of Places, which looks at benchmark-setting game worlds and levels

People

BENNETT FODDY

The Oxford University ethicist with a sideline in quirky physics games



Bennett Foddy's games begin life as distractions playable in a Web browser, although *QWOP* recently became an iOS title. Expect more to appear in mobile form in the future

Gerard Vong

CV

URL www.foddy.net
Softography *Too Many Ninjas, Evacuation, Chicanery, Little Master Cricket, Winner Vs Loser, QWOP, GIRP*



One of **Bennett Foddy**'s colleagues is an avid rock climber. "I was trying to get him to try [rock-climbing game] *GIRP*, but he refused," Foddy says. "He said it was as though I was saying: 'Hey, I came up with a really great new form of crack – it's really addictive!' I think that's the crux of the issue with games for many philosophers. Since we work alone most of the time, we have to be extremely careful about procrastinating. So most avoid games like the plague."

As deputy director of the Institute for Science and Ethics at Oxford University and one-man indie developer, Foddy is clearly an exception to the rule. In fact, it was the desire to dawdle that drove him into game development in the first place.

"I had tried many times over the years to learn to make games but I never got very far," he explains. "In 2007 I was in such a deep haze of PhD procrastination that I honestly could have finished any task in the world other than my PhD, no matter how large or how impossible. So finally I managed to get something working: a reimagining of the bonus game from *IK+*, in which, instead of repelling balls with a shield, you're fighting ninjas with a sword."

Foddy uploaded *Too Many Ninjas* to his website and, soon afterwards, it made the front page of Digg. "It was so massively gratifying that I knew I had to make more games. Game creation is basically an introverted pursuit during the process, but then it becomes very extroverted when you publish – especially when you self-publish, as I do. The great thing is that it's so integrative… you do art, code, writing, design, music, sound, all by yourself, and somehow a good game becomes more than the sum of its parts. I also feel that games have a potential to deliver something that other art forms can't, by virtue of the fact that they are interactive. Even when the writing and art are rudimentary, you can get involved in game characters and worlds in a way that you can't in a movie or a book."

"So much is happening in games, and much of the best stuff is outside of the commercial space"

Growing up in Australia in the '80s, Foddy owned a ZX Spectrum and later an Amiga, spending all of his spare time buried in games. It's a heritage still very much alive in his mind today as he plucks obscurities from thin air – *Pyro II*, a freeware DOS game by *Guild Wars* designer Michael O'Brien, and Sente's *Off The Wall* – before excitedly explaining the genius he perceives behind their design.

It's from this appreciation of classic early games that *QWOP*, Foddy's first major 'hit' indie game in which you control a track runner by using the titular keys to control each of his individual limbs, originated. "It used to be that new athletics games came out every year and sold in the millions – *Summer Games*, *Track & Field*, and all those classics," Foddy says. "But the idea eventually died away, unable to evolve past rapid button-pressing or joystick-waggling. There was an Apple II game called *Olympic Decathlon* in 1981, where the shot put event has you controlling your triceps and shoulder muscles separately to throw the shot. It wasn't a case of consciously thinking 'I can put these ideas together', it was more that I realised I could create an athletics game in this particular, muscles-up way, and I had to see if it would work.

"If you ask the people who are really good at *QWOP*, they will tell you that eventually the convoluted interface becomes invisible and their brains adapt. They aren't thinking 'Q-W-O-P', they're thinking 'run forward' and their fingers just do what's necessary." For Foddy it's this theme of 'embodiment' – having the player physically feel what the onscreen avatar feels – that currently provides most interest to him in game design.

"Through a bunch of tricks and illusions, good action games get you to feel embodied in the character on the screen," he says. "You're not controlling Mario; you actually start to feel like you are Mario, jumping around onscreen. There are a lot of ways to maximise that psychological effect, and one of them is just to minimise the time delay between when a player intends to move the character and when the character moves. But another method I've explored in *GIRP* is to make a kind of analogy between the controls and the onscreen actions. You have to hold on to the keys in *GIRP*, just as the character has to hold on to the cliff."

Foddy's professional work concerns addiction, a perennially hot topic in videogame discourse. Later this year he is giving a lecture at NYU on the ethics of making games 'addictive' and yet his insights into the workings of the human brain cannot help but affect his own game design work. "I have used some of what I know about the neuroscience and psychology of addiction to make the games more compelling. But lately I've started to think that it might be better not to use all of the 'tricks of the trade'. The loot systems in games like *Diablo* or *World Of Warcraft* are addictive, but probably not in a way that makes the games better. If a game is good, it will be addictive, and that's fine — all the best things in life are addictive. But a game can also be addictive without being good."

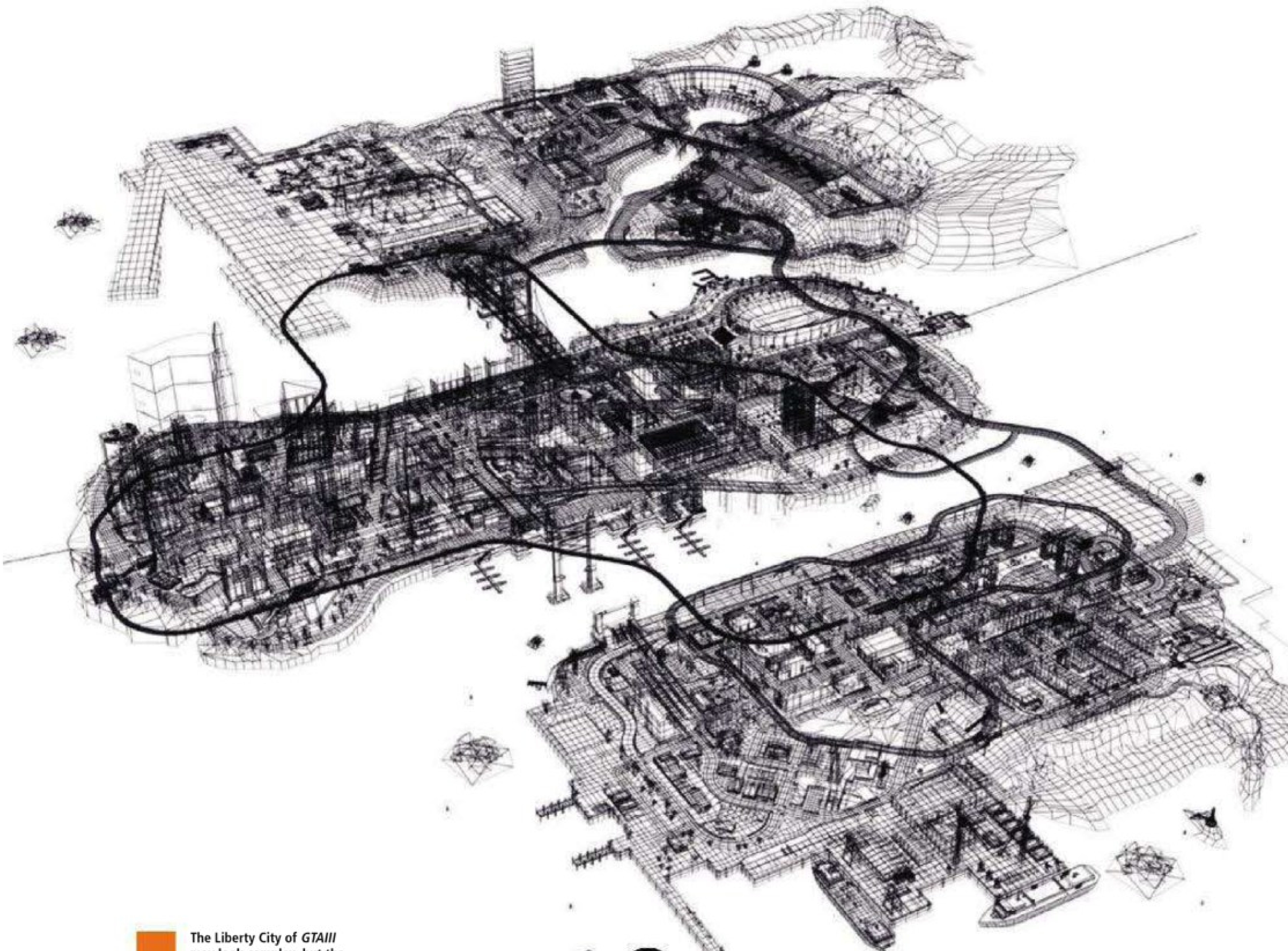
Far from being isolated by his academic day job, Foddy is a fervent evangelist for the burgeoning indie games community. "I think games that are written by a single person tend to be rougher but far more original – a single developer can take bigger creative risks and they can change important aspects of the design all the way up to the day of release if they want. So you get huge breakthroughs, not just in terms of technology but in terms of the basic mechanics and designs of games and in terms of artistically satisfying experiences. So much is happening in games right now, and much of the best stuff is happening outside the commercial space, just as it did for film, theatre, music and every other creative form."

As a result of this perspective, Foddy views mainstream game development with some pity. "To be completely honest with you, I don't understand why anyone would want to work for a mainstream, industrial software house. This is a golden age for games developers, a time when you can make money making original, artistically valuable games on your own, or with a couple of friends. You don't need to spend four years making 3D shoes for the players in *Madden*. You don't need to winnow away five per cent of your lifespan programming interface routines for a game that gets canned by John Riccitiello three months from release. I like playing triple-A games as much as anyone, but I have no idea why you'd want to make one." ■

Places

LIBERTY CITY

The rise of the 3D metropolis at the heart of the GTA universe



The Liberty City of *GTAIII* may look complex, but the version realised for *GTAIV* took things to a new scale, Rockstar's artists taking in the region of a quarter of a million photographs of NY for reference purposes

bit.ly/jO1bA2
The making of GTAIV

From *GTA, GTAIII, GTAIV*
Developer DMA Design/Rockstar North
Origin UK
First release 1997

Everywhere has a beginning. In *GTAIII*, radio host Lazlow tells an irate caller that, at the time the telephone was invented, Liberty City was no more than "a church, a cow pasture and three houses." The city's real-world foundations can be traced back to March 1995, and a document prepared by DMA Design for a game tentatively titled *Race 'N' Chase*. Even at this early stage, much of what we know as Liberty City was present.

"The game will be set in a present-day world," the document records. "In each game type, it will be possible to progress to other cities only when certain goals have been attained.

"The playing world will be very, very large," it continues. "There will be a number of clear landmarks to ease navigation. The landscape will consist of: roads, pavements, buildings, water hazards, bridges. The landscape will be highly populated: there will be lots of incidental things to see, like traffic, pedestrians, etc. It will be possible for cars to cause damage to buildings."



It's the coherence that really marks out Liberty City as unique among 3D game worlds, giving it a powerful sense of being alive

From these early beginnings, the crime-ridden echo of New York has become the bedrock of the most recognisable game series in the world. It has been built and torn down repeatedly, reconceptualised with successive hardware generations as something grander and more ambitious, evolving from a top-down moving map to a densely populated 3D metropolis.

The original Liberty City was nothing particularly special. It was one of three cities designed for the game that in the end wasn't called *Race 'N' Chase*, but *Grand Theft Auto*, and released in late 1997. But flashes of the creativity and attitude which would mark the later versions of the city are present, particularly an unusually open approach, allowing players to roam the city. "We understood what was cool about it was the idea of freedom," remembers Rockstar president of creative **Dan Houser**. "It wasn't level-based. Games at that time were very: 'Here's a tiny corridor to walk down and a very structured puzzle'. But here was something more: 'Here's a world and there's things to do'."

> Aside from architecture, what gives Liberty City its sense of place is its self-reinforcing level of detail

It wasn't until DMA was deciding what to do with its creation next that things got interesting. "At the end of *GTA2*, someone from the team popped up with a version of the game, which was in what we described as 2.5D," says **Sam Houser**. "It was basically the *GTA2* engine but you could play it in 3D, and it was mind-blowing. I was like: 'Oh, man, if we do this in proper 3D it's going to be insane'."

It was around this time that Take-Two bought DMA Design, and the studio became Rockstar North. Shifts in personnel meant the team – including producer Leslie Benzies and art director Aaron Garbut – became the core of the new setup. According to Sam Houser, they too had been working on a 3D title. "Their side-project evolved into what *GTAIII* became."

The result was an authentic revelation, a complex, functioning and explorable city, with a working infrastructure and vibrant, distinctive neighbourhoods. The Liberty City of *GTAIII* has three boroughs – the grimy starting location of Portland Island, the upscale business district of Staunton Island, and the suburban Shoreside Vale. A new RenderWare engine, created by fellow UK developer Criterion, powered what, after *GTA2*, seemed an impossibly vivid street-level view.

Aside from architecture and space, what gives Liberty City its sense of place is its self-reinforcing level of detail. Headlines are delivered by newspapers whose adverts are heard on the in-car radio, while billboards display names of businesses that are tied into the player's quest for revenge. Even the team at Rockstar were surprised by how engaging it proved. "We were like, 'Wow, this is really powerful'," says Dan Houser. "When people postulate that games are going to be the next mass form of entertainment, this is the kind of thing they're going to be able to do. Yes, you can have – and we love – strong narrative, but you can have that inter-related to the whole experience in quite a new way."

It was a hunger for this kind of detail and interconnection that guided the latest rebuilding of Liberty City, for 2008's *GTAIV*. "It's the biggest city we've ever built, but not the biggest area," Dan Houser says. "If the difference from *GTA2* to *GTAIII* was 2D to 3D, then this time it was low-def to hi-def. What that meant was detail."

GTA's art director **Aaron Garbut** describes the latest iteration as three times the size of *GTAIII*'s Liberty City. "We took around a quarter of a million photos and a silly amount of video footage," he says. "We also had a full-time research team based in New York."

The result was astounding – a beautifully nuanced and intricate environment with a more serious edge. "The energy we got into that world – whether you're going for a drink in a bar or seeing a busker is, I think, as much as we were capable of," says Dan Houser. "And we did that by going to a granular level with everything." More than anything, a realism underpinned the new Liberty City, which was more consciously based on New York than either of its forebears. "I was away for two weeks in Edinburgh and when I came back it didn't feel like I'd left," Sam Houser told us before *GTAIV*'s release. "I was coming over the bridge on my first day back and I'm like, 'Why doesn't this feel any different? Because I've been doing it 50 times a day'." ■

Things

MARIO'S GOLD COINS

Why Nintendo's most abundant offerings are also among its most valuable



If "a single coin may have the power to change your destiny," as a Pianta says in Super Mario Sunshine, then six could change a whole lot more, as their adaptive role in Mario's evolution demonstrates

With the *Zelda* series increasingly concerned with curation, it's left to Mario to provide the focal point for pure creativity in Nintendo's universe. Link's ever-repeating adventures are never particularly short of invention, but his dungeon masters seem to have trouble letting go, turning even incidental rifts into ongoing lore. Mario, on the other hand, spares relatively little thought for history, and will shred good ideas with no obvious remorse – often after a single outing. Deformable terrain, animal suits, a handful of different approaches to flight: concepts come and go pretty easily in the Mushroom Kingdom, and even returning favourites rarely make it back in without a clever tweak or two.

A few special things remain sacred and consistent, however. One of them is undoubtedly crucial: the plumber's weight is fixed and constant, rendering his particular sense of heft in the air or on foot unmistakable. The other unchanging element, meanwhile, initially seems pretty trivial compared to that. It's a token of the most literal kind: Mario's gold coins.

So why has such a simple, seemingly unimportant, aspect of the grand design endured? After all, collectables can be toxic for any kind of games, but they're particularly dangerous when combined with platformers. They're a siren lure towards padding, a temptation to rely on pure endurance exploration and treasure hunts. Mario's adventures have indulged in their fair share of both activities, of course, yet those unmistakable coins – possibly the most recognisable collectable ever – remain weirdly untarnished by it. Somehow, they've retained their value while Sonic The Hedgehog's tinkling golden rings have become little more than a cold, hard health mechanic, Crash Bandicoot's apples are all but forgotten, and *Banjo-Kazooie*'s in-game economy has collapsed into miserable hyperinflation among a shrill muddle of musical notes, puzzle pieces, honeycomb chunks and Mumbo tokens.

Mario's coins top up his health like Sonic's rings, and they form part of a complex structure of collectables as they slot in alongside a fluctuating mass of mushrooms, flowers, Shines and Star Bits: as a whole, it almost rivals any of Rare's excesses. They've proved so unnaturally hardy, though, not just because of their cheerily iconic nature or the irresistible urge every player feels to snap them up as quickly as possible. It's because the reason for snapping them up has been quietly and consistently repurposed over the decades, depending on the needs of the game.



Despite debuting in 1985's *Mario Bros*, glittering mintage retain a fundamental place in the Mario universe, as *Galaxy* illustrates

So while gold coins have always been worth grabbing – in fact, it can take a surprising amount of willpower to leave them where they are – they've performed a range of different functions. In the original *Mario Bros*, they were the perfect arcade contrivance: a deadly points-hoarding lure to distract your attention away from enemies. Eugene Jarvis would have been proud. During the side-scrolling years, however, from that very first mystery block in World 1-1 when they rewarded you for the simple act of performing a jump, their mischievous side all but vanished. They were cast, instead, as an indicator of the hidden nature of the Mario games' secrets: a bribe to punch every brick, climb every vine and test every pipe. They became an invitation to slow down rather than speed up, a reason to explore. They were a reward for replaying the games and even trying to see if you could break them.

> Only Mario's coins can guide you without patronising you, providing seemingly random knots of gold

Now, as Mario's latest travels pass through ever-more-complex worlds, as they begin to fiddle with physics and to bend geometry in some distinctly non-Euclidean manners, the gold coins have evolved into an elegant and understated form of guide. Part tutorial, part pathfinder, wherever Mario goes, he follows a bright trail picked out in clusters of spinning coins in order to get there. It's a helping hand so subtle you'll barely notice it: the perfect system of waypoint markers to complement the perfect game.

And the most brilliant thing about it is that they're generally used fairly sparingly. Pathfinding – especially inside complex, gimmick-riddled 3D worlds – remains one of the trickiest of problems to solve. Maps can be hard to read and spoilerish, and they have a nasty habit of breaking up the flow of discovery. *Fable II*'s breadcrumb trail was perhaps too cute and too intrusive, and it was certainly too unreliable. As for Joanna Dark's wretched time-delayed disco chevrons, or Isaac Clarke's hand-mounted laser, they seem like open admissions of design failure, even if they're gracefully employed. Only Mario's coins can guide you without patronising you, providing seemingly random knots of gold that allow you to discover the correct path through the most intricate of environments with an ease that can feel spookily similar to intuition.

Ultimately, then, it all comes down to a flair for adaptation. So much changes: the console, the audience and sometimes even the genre. Yet almost every Mario game – even the sideshows – has made use of those coins, whether they're providing the magic-potion Easter eggs of *Super Mario 2* or the stand-in racing line for the *Mario Kart* games. Unlike something such as arcade-style scoring, a vestigial tail that is now reserved for the 2D Mushroom Kingdom outings only, Mario's gold coins are simply too irresistible – and too helpful – to ever cast aside. ■

STUDIO PROFILE

Q-Games

A look behind the doors of a tirelessly creative developer employing a healthy mix of western and Japanese staff







❶ *Starfox Command* was developed by Q-Games as the fifth title in the *Starfox* series, and the first to be released for a handheld.
❷ *Racers* was the initial *PixelJunk* game, back in 2007, and set the tone for the company's 2D style. It was followed by *Racers 2nd Lap*.
❸ *Monsters* arrived in 2008, as a tower defence game featuring a soundtrack composed by the Kyoto-based outfit Autograph

Q-Games is not a normal Japanese game developer, and not only because it's situated in laid-back Kansai rather than workaholic Tokyo. Where Japanese development is often a fairly rigid heirachy, led by the distinctive voice of one auteur (or, very occasionally, two), Q-Games favours a collaborative approach, attempting to channel the creative energies of all its staff in one direction. Its 44 employees work out of a lively, open-plan office (with an extra-large massage chair) on the third floor of a small building just outside the centre of Kyoto. No cubicles, no grey furniture. But it's perhaps the studio's comfortable mixture of Japanese and foreign contributors that most distinguishes Q from its peers. It's that confluence of Japanese and western development approaches that infuses its products – the *PixelJunk* series most famous among them – with their one-of-a-kind spirit and artistic direction.

"It's a great place to work for many reasons," says **Shouichi Tominaga**, who began working at Q about seven years ago and is now director of the *PixelJunk* games. "I particularly like that, because it's a smallish company still, you've got a lot of feedback coming from the bottom up. That doesn't happen in larger Japanese organisations. We work as a team, there's a lot of trial and error, and that's how the end game, or product, gets improved – through this cycle of feedback. As a company, they're not afraid at all of trying to make something new, and that's unique in terms of Japanese game development, especially. I don't think that what you have running out there is something you'll find in any other Japanese game company."

The studio was founded in 2001 by **Dylan Cuthbert**, a Brit with experience at Sony and Nintendo, and it maintains close ties with both of those Japanese giants. As well as its *PixelJunk* series of quirky downloadables, Q-Games created a lot of the tech for PlayStation 3's XMB and music visualiser, developed DS game *Starfox Command*, and contributed three games to the *BitGenerations* series and DSiWare store. Those relationships are enduringly fruitful for Cuthbert and his staff. Working on PS3's visualisation elements gave the firm a head start on PS3 technology that formed the genesis of the *PixelJunk* idea.

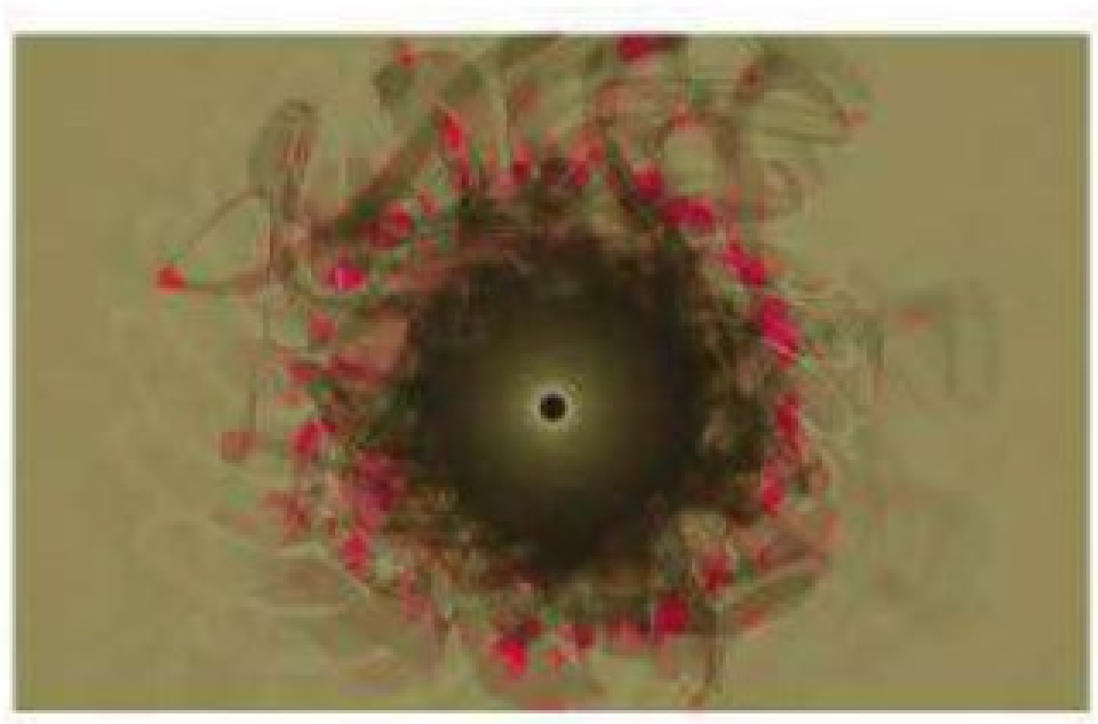
"We have an R&D team here, three or four very talented programmers, and because of our links with Sony they were given the task of working with PS3 system software development," explains Tominaga. "So we were a little ahead of the curve compared to other companies because we knew early on about the possibilities of the PS3. We thought: 'How can we harness this technology with our originality and publish it ourselves?' We didn't want to do what other companies were doing, and so the idea was to do a series of games – not just one game, a series – under the *PixelJunk* label, which would all be very much infused with Q-Games-esque gameplay and content."

"It all started with the idea of 2D," Cuthbert elaborates. "Initially, we took a HDTV into the office and the first thing I noticed was how crisp the colours were over HDMI. And I thought: 'Back in the day, we'd play these old 8bit games on an SDTV, and the colours would be all washy, there'd be lines on the screen, but now we've gotten away from that'. Suddenly, it's all very crisp and clear, and I thought: 'Here we have a good chance to take those old 2D games and see how they expand onto that big screen'.

"What we did initially was take screenshots of C64 and Spectrum games like *Spy Vs Spy*, and we tiled them on the HDTV to see what they would look like. You can fit at least 17 of them on an HD screen at original resolution. They looked like a completely different game immediately – it looked really cool, and that was the beginning of our 2D push. We've got all this extra resolution that we can use to create old-school graphics, and they can still look wonderful. If just tiling an old screenshot looked that good, imagine what we could make!"

"We initially took screenshots of C64 and Spectrum games like *Spy Vs Spy* and tiled them on an HDTV"

That idea developed into the first *PixelJunk* game, *Racers*, and 2D has been the series' aesthetic anchor ever since. That, in itself, has made it eye-catching from the start – the games' two-dimensional artistic direction, particularly *Eden*'s, marked them out as different from the competition. "A lot of people were focused on creating fantastic 3D worlds just because of the amount of power that you could get out of this thing. We wanted another direction, our own way – and in a way that made it easy, because going 2D when everyone else was going 3D made our games have their own flavour," Tominaga says.



***PixelJunk Lifelike*, also featured on p16, is expected late 2011**

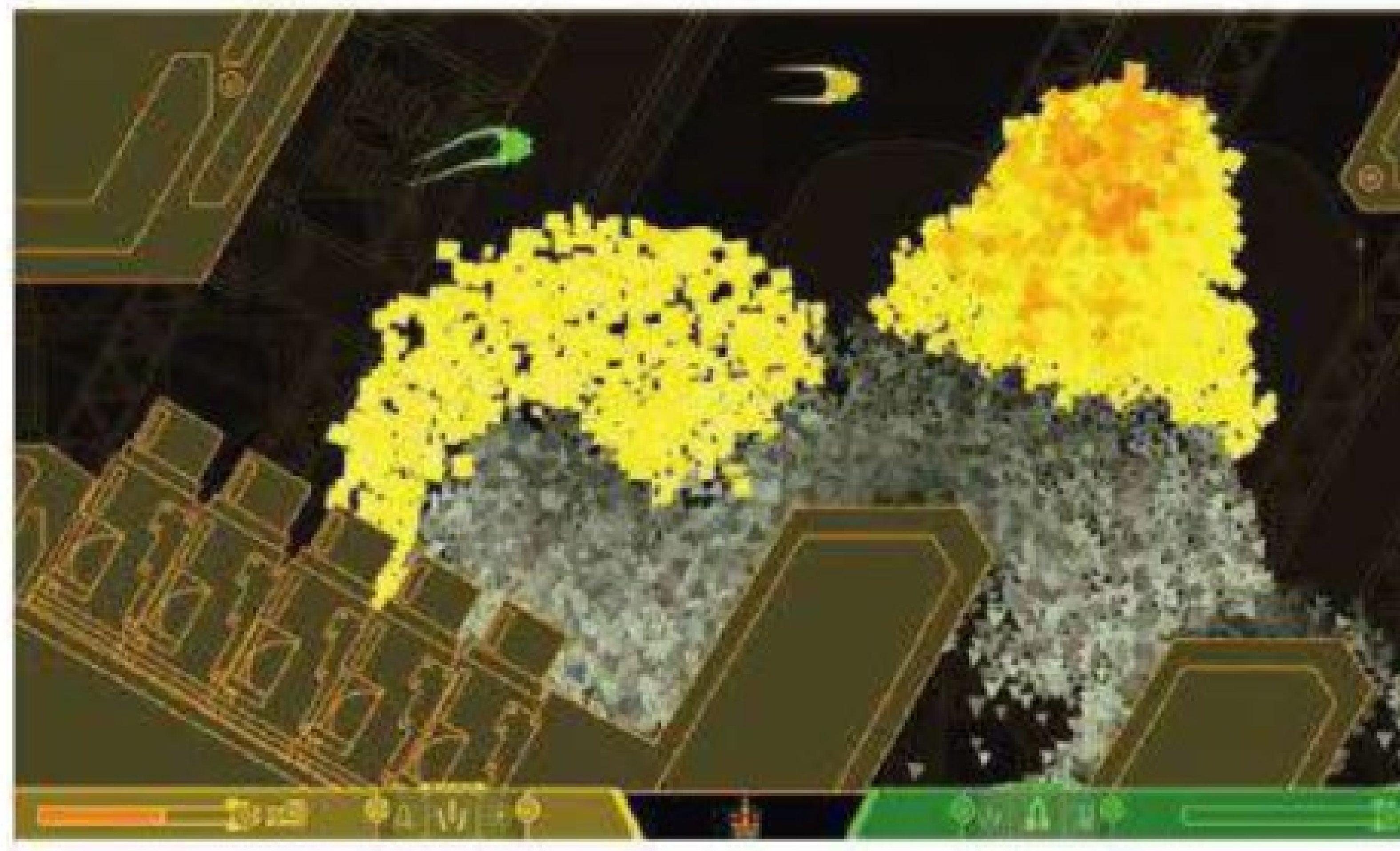
But the games' true hallmark is their talent for repackaging familiar genres in new and stimulating forms. With its slowly unfurling plantlife and fascinatingly minimalist sound, *Eden* is no conventional platformer; in *Racers*, meanwhile, races in which the objective is simply to cross the finish line first are the exception rather than the norm. *Shooter* and *Shooter 2*'s wonderfully tactile, fluid, gloopy liquids distance them from any other twin-stick shooter you'll play. There are elements of nostalgia, certainly, a particular retro-chic flavour, but they're deceptive – these are 2D games that are ineluctably products of the 21st century. Their self-effacing nature isn't something you find often in games so aggressively innovative.

Q-Games is currently readying two new entries in the series – *PixelJunk Lifelike* (see p16), a fascinating blend of communal rhythm-action, music creation and visualiser, and *PixelJunk Sidescroller* (see p54), a playful twist on the *Shooter* formula that recasts it as a scrolling shooter in the *R-Type* mould – to the extent that *PixelJunk* games ever base themselves on any one mould. *Sidescroller* retains the ship from *Shooter* as well as some of its gameplay quirks, such as

Q-Games

Founded 2001
Employees 44
Key staff Dylan Cuthbert (founder and president), Tominaga Shouichi (*PixelJunk* director), Kentaro Yoshida (studio director), Maeta Kazushi (chief planner), Paul Leonard (chief artist), Yutaka Kurahashi (chief artist), Jerome Liard (chief tech programmer), Ryuji Nishikawa (chief game programmer)
URL www.q-games.com
Selected softography *Digidrive, Starfox Command, Digidrive, Reflect Missile, Starship Patrol, 3D Space Tank, PixelJunk Racers, PixelJunk Monsters, PixelJunk Monsters Encore, PixelJunk Eden, PixelJunk Eden Encore, PixelJunk Monsters Deluxe, PixelJunk Shooter, PixelJunk Racers 2nd Lap, PixelJunk Shooter 2*
Current projects *PixelJunk Lifelike, PixelJunk Sidescroller*, plus additional, as-yet-unannounced projects





Japanese office buildings can often be uninspiring places, but Q-Games encourages its employees to make their space their own (right). The desks are crowded with photos, toys and artwork, something you wouldn't see in the more common slate-grey cubicle

dunking yourself into water to recover health, but the puzzle-exploration structure is gone, replaced by colourful and, at the moment, extremely challenging obstacle courses of nimble, darting enemies, magma-spewers, streams of bullets, dangerous machinery and criss-crossing lasers. *Lifelike*, meanwhile, is one of PlayStation Move's most interesting up-and-comers, a rhythm game that you control with your hands. Using the face buttons to switch between different elements of the track – bassline, effects, etc – you alter and shape the music with your movements. Holding the Move controller in front of you, you probe for the sounds you want, throwing in one-shot effects with a sweep of the arm. It's like painting with an invisible palette of sound, spread across an easel placed in the space between yourself and the screen, and it's an experience far closer to music creation than beat-matching.

Lifelike continues a Q-Games musical tradition rather than starting one. Every game since *Racers* has used bespoke music, often from local artists. *Monsters*' soundtrack was composed by a husband-and-wife pair of Kyoto artists called Autograph, whom Tominaga and Cuthbert came across at a local gig. "The problem in Japan is the huge label organisations," says Cuthbert. "If you sign up anybody on a regular label – not an indie – there's no way you can afford them. So you try and get bands who are independent, especially for our size of game, as there's not that much money to throw around. [Autograph] did very well out of *Monsters* – it sold a lot and they get a kind of royalty from the deal, so they're happy. It was a really good collaboration with them, I thought."

Eden, too, was originally a game based entirely on the music and artwork of another local artist, Baiyon, whose work also powers *Lifelike*. "I had heard through the grapevine that there was an artisty kind of guy who was interested in meeting me because he wanted to make games, which I ignored for about a year," Cuthbert laughs. "Then I met him by accident at a party, and he wouldn't get away from me, so I listened to what he had to say… He was quite good, so we thought: 'Let's make the third title in the series based on whatever this guy can come up with'."

What he came up with, in the end, was more an extremely pretty visualiser than a game; it took about eight months of work to turn his concept of growing plants into something playable. But it resulted in one of the most unusual games that Q has ever done, and indeed one of the most unusual and visually intense platformers of recent years. It's something that could only come out of a studio with an adventurously creative nature. "There's so much creativity in every person that it's sometimes quite difficult to channel it all in the same direction," says Cuthbert. "But that's what makes it more interesting as a company."

Asked what it is about the studio that cultivates such an environment, both Tominaga and Cuthbert cite the staff, an eclectic mix of artists, experienced designers and new talent from across several different cultures. "We have such an interesting mix of foreign and Japanese staff, which adds a lot more into the games we make," says Cuthbert.

> "There's so much creativity in every person that it's sometimes difficult to channel it in the same direction"

"Japanese people focus on some things, and the others concentrate on different things, so it's a good blend. The Japanese focus tends to be on minute detail, whereas western developers often consider the big picture without paying attention to the detail. The Japanese method is micro-managed game design, where everything is checked and slotted together. If you look at Nintendo games, or any Japanese game, I think, it's pretty much like that."

Japanese developers are increasingly waking up to the fact that varied input is necessary for creating varied products. You'll find far more foreign staff in most Japanese developers today than you would have a decade ago. But for those other studios, maintaining workplace harmony between native and foreign staff can be a difficult balance to strike. "They make a ghetto," Cuthbert explains. "Even at Q Entertainment [Tetsuya Mizuguchi's studio] or Grasshopper, there's basically a gaijin enclave, and then there's the Japanese – it's separated entirely.

"Those two companies brought in so many foreigners so quickly. When I met the president of iNiS a couple of years back, she was talking about the problems they were having, and there was a real 'us and them' feeling, apparently. You would have all the gaijin in one area and they'd have one or two spokespersons who communicated with the rest!"

The smaller team size makes a huge difference at Q-Games, but there's also no insurmountable language barrier separating the office down the middle – there's not a single person at the studio without workable Japanese. "Nobody in this building runs English Windows," Cuthbert laughs.

"With other companies, you're talking about big teams, and lots of differences in languages. We don't have that here. It's a fully Japanese-based office. We don't allow anybody to not get into learning the language. That's very important – it's not hard to learn if you just try."

Q-Games' charmingly cross-cultural approach comes across as very modern. It's a studio that seems unaffected by the wider creativity slump across the Japanese industry over the past few years, and it's not difficult to see why. "I think we're getting more confident with ourselves," Cuthbert says when asked how Q's personality has developed over the past nine-and-a-half years. "Not overly confident, but confident enough to be able to push back against publishers and things. We have more self-understanding.

"There's a lot of humour that underpins the company. It's quiet at times, rowdy at others, but it's always relaxed – even when we get really busy. The staff are funny, a bit boisterous at times, eccentric. I love it. I mean, it's not like I can leave – but I do love the place." ■



Q&A



Dylan Cuthbert
Founder and president, Q-Games

British developers running their own studios in Japan are hardly ten-a-penny. After beginning his career at Argonaut, Cuthbert came to Kyoto to work with Nintendo on Super FX-powered 3D games including *Starfox*. He then moved on to Sony Computer Entertainment America, before returning to Japan to create PlayStation 2 games (the infamous rubber-duck tech demo that remains one of the most memorable things about the PS2 launch was his handiwork). His time at Nintendo has undoubtedly left its mark on Q-Games' output; as a westerner working out of Nintendo's Kyoto office, he was uniquely placed to learn from its way of doing things.

What do you think you learned from your time at Nintendo?

I learned how to actually make games that had a proper ending. Up until then, all the British-made games I had played – or made – always had some great concept, something new or interesting about them, but they never gave you an ending – they never put the effort in. Almost all the games I played on the ZX Spectrum back in the '80s, I wouldn't get to the end of. It was too difficult – there wasn't even an ending at all on most of them. And what I learned from Nintendo games is that the whole experience should be balanced from beginning to end. You were expected to get to the end. There's the sense that it's crafted from start to finish. And I think that's what we try to copy from Nintendo – that sense of craftedness.

There are lots of theories about the 'Nintendo difference' – its particular way of making games. As someone who has worked there, do you have any particular insight into what it is?

[Shigeru] Miyamoto is very clever and very fussy. That's a lot of what sets him apart. From the '80s, he has been the ideas man who controls the quality of output, and above him there was [Hiroshi] Yamauchi, who was of a similar mindset – although he was more financially motivated. But he would stop games if it wasn't good enough for the image of Nintendo. I think Miyamoto was mentored by that way of thought, and he's become a perfectionist. It's not that a game has to be perfect in every way, but it has to be as good as it can be from where the gamer perceives it. He doesn't like loading screens, or any kind of delay before getting into the actual game. There aren't many Nintendo games that begin with a CG movie, apart from *Mario Sunshine*.

Have you tried to carry any of that through to how things are done at Q-Games?

I certainly try to! I would think some of it has rubbed off. There are some things that don't work [Nintendo's] way at Q because we have such a large foreign contingent – it's difficult to groom them into that way of thinking quickly enough. Slowly but surely, though, they begin to understand the Nintendo way of doing things, and that does seep into the culture here.





Situated in relaxed Kansai, Q-Games' headquarters are home to around 50 members of staff, working in a comfortable, open-plan office on the third floor









ChinaJoy not only gives local players the chance to try out new products first, but also offers the wider gaming industry the chance to experience China's gaming world first hand









CHINAJOY EXPO

A SHANGHAI TRADE SHOW FROM THE HEART OF CHINA

From a western perspective, China's rich culture and focused game industry can appear impenetrable. Catalysed by the country's thriving internet café culture and the rise of free-to-play, the devotion of Chinese players to massively multiplayer online games has seen the sector grow rapidly, effortlessly outpacing the home console market that is traditionally more popular in the west.

While the east can be confusing to the west, the opposite is also true and only a small number of China's game developers have managed to take their products overseas. However, those that have demonstrate a remarkable aptitude for international acquisitions and marketing activities: The9's investment in OpenFeint and Red5; Shanda's acquisition of Mochi and a number of Korean game companies; Perfect World's acquisition of Runic Games; and a number of Chinese game companies' multi-million dollar investment in the operation rights of overseas titles.

Indeed, in 2010 China's General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) worked with the International Data Group (IDG) to jointly issue a report on the country's online game industry. It revealed that online games reaped around $5 billion during the year, boasting a significant year-on-year growth rate of 26 per cent – pretty spectacular by any standards.

The ChinaJoy event, now in its ninth year, provides a platform to access the Chinese game industry

According to the report, domestically produced online titles earned nearly $3 billion in 2010 (up from $2.4 billion the previous year) achieving a market share of 65 per cent – a market China-produced titles have now held a leading position in for five years in a row. The same year, the Chinese industry looked outward as 34 companies turned their attention to lucrative overseas markets, exporting 82 games and in the process netting up to $230 million (a massive 111 per cent increase on 2009's $109 million). It is clear that there is a huge and rapidly expanding market rising in the east.

ChinaJoy, a comprehensive industry event now in its ninth year, provides a platform to access the Chinese game industry and includes market information sharing, copyright trade, technical exchange and outsourcing for international professional visitors.

A total of 290 games were displayed at ChinaJoy 2010, including 30 PC games, 203 online games, 19 console games and 38 mobile games, of which 217 were there for marketing and copyright licensing. The event attracted over 10,000 trade visitors to its business-to-business area, the high attendance of game professionals

CHINAJOY SPEAKERS



Yuxin Ren
President of Tencent Games



Alan Qunzhao Tan
Chairman of the board and CEO, Shanda Games Limited



Michael Yufeng Chi
CEO of Beijing Perfect World Network Technology Co, Ltd



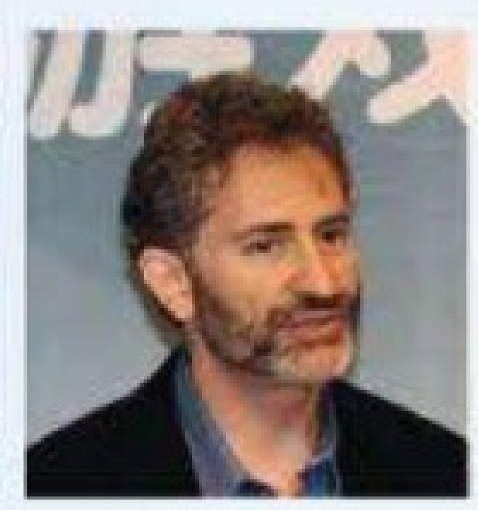
Yasuda Tetsuhiko,
President, Sony Computer Entertainment Asia



William Ding
CEO, Netease Interactive Entertainment Inc



Mineo Koda
Deputy GM, International Business Dept, Nintendo



Mike Morhaime
President, CEO and co-founder, Blizzard

SCHEDULE

EVENT	DATE	VENUE	DETAILS
ChinaJoy Expo (en.chinajoy.net)	July 28–31, 2011	Hall W1–W4, Shanghai New International Expo Center	The Expo Chinajoy Cosplay Carnival Miss ChinaJoy Beauty Pageant Chinajoy E-Sports Tournament Finals
ChinaJoy Business To Business Area (btoben.chinajoy.net)	July 28–30, 2011	Hall W5, Shanghai New International Expo Center	Development Tools Display Area Business Matching Area Mobile Game Area Innovation Area
China Game Business Conference (en.chinagbc.com.cn)	July 27–30, 2011	Kerry Hotel Pudong, Shanghai	China International Digital Entertainment Summit Mobile Internet Entertainment Forum Webgame Forum SNS and Social Game Forum Media Marketing Forum Overseas Development and Cooperation Forum Investment and Financing Forum Online Game and Industrial Chain Cooperation Forum
China Game Developers Conference (en.chinagdc.com.cn)	July 28–30, 2011	Kerry Hotel Pudong, Shanghai	Keynote Speech Online Game Session Mobile Games Summit Webgame Summit Social Game Summit Future Summit Sponsor Session Soul of Dragon CGDS Networking Party
China Game Outsourcing Conference (en.chinagoc.com.cn)	July 28–31, 2011	Kerry Hotel Pudong, Shanghai	Keynote Speech Theme Forum Business Matching Day Brilliant Night 2011

中国游戏商务大会
China Game Business Conference

China Game Developers Conference

中国游戏外包大会
China Game Outsourcing Conference

and the rich collection of products making establishing partnerships of all kinds possible.

ChinaJoy 2011, taking place in Shanghai between July 28–31, is expected to attract in excess of 150,000 public visitors, along with 15,000 professionals from 33 countries accommodated by this year's expanded 8,000m^2 B To B Area. The annual event is China's top professional business platform for copyright trade, copyright cooperation, joint development and joint operations, with a versatile business matching system that will facilitate online and offline interaction between exhibitors and visitors. Pavilions from Singapore, Canada, Germany, Spain, Malta and Korea have already confirmed attendance, the B To B Area offering ChinaJoy's B2B Showcase, Development Tools Display Area, CGOC Business Matching Area, Innovation Area, Mobile Game Negotiation Area and Investment And Financing Area to meet professional visitors' various needs.

An important annual event in gaming circles, ChinaJoy is sure to offer the perfect experience to participants who can also take advantage of three additional business conferences:

China Game Business Conference

Organised alongside ChinaJoy, the China Game Business Conference (CGBC) is one of the serial events of the biggest game show in the world. Since 2004, the conference has gathered the global game industry's key figures to discuss the future development of the industry at the China International Digital Entertainment Summit. Attendees have included founders and senior executives of companies such as Blizzard, Electronic Arts, Ubisoft, Nintendo, Shanda, Perfect World, Changyou.com and NetEase.

CGBC 2010 attracted over 2,000 industry professionals from around the world to its eight forums, and more than 200 speakers, proving itself to be one of the most important business events on the game industry calendar. The conference was sponsored by 32 companies and reported on by over 100 media outlets.

China Game Developers Conference

The China Game Developers Conference (CGDC) was established with the development characteristics of China's online game industry in mind, and covers design, visual arts, programming, testing, audio, management, security and operation domain. It represents the best opportunity for game developers to share the latest technology in game development, find partners and strengthen connections.

This year's conference will present over 90 sessions, with participation from more than 130 companies offering exhibition, sponsorship and technology displays as well as providing the opportunity for face-to-face discussions with over 4,000 game developers. Other unique events include the Future Summit, Mobile Games Summit, Webgame Summit, Social Game Summit and the Soul of Dragon VIP Networking Party.

China Game Outsourcing Conference

Outsourcing is the Chinese industry's primary way of participating in the global forum, and China remains one of the world's major outsourcing suppliers as a result. The China Game Outsourcing Conference (CGOC) is the largest local event for game outsourcing. This year's second CGOC is composed of the China Game Outsourcing Summit, Business Matching Day and the Brilliant Night 2011 Business Banquet.

THE MAKING OF...

Medal Of Honor

It may now be one of gaming's biggest franchises, but few realise that Medal Of Honor was almost killed before it cleared the beach



Artist Matt Hall's character art was inspired by Saving Private Ryan: "We wanted the main character to be this quintessential everyman, which is what the heroes in Spielberg's movies always were"

Format PlayStation
Publisher EA
Developer DreamWorks Interactive
Origin US
Release 1999

It's November 1999 and the atmosphere in Steven Spielberg's office is frosty. The director's Amblin production company, on the Universal Studios lot, is hosting Paul Bucha, the president of the Congressional Medal of Honor Society. The Vietnam veteran, awarded America's highest decoration for his own courage under fire, is stating his case against videogames. Strongly. The particular target of his ire: a firstperson shooter based on an original concept by Spielberg himself called *Medal Of Honor*.

Spielberg, whose company DreamWorks Interactive developed the title, looks absolutely gutted. *Medal Of Honor* was his passion project, after all, designed to give kids genuine insight into the history behind WWII. As a proud American, the filmmaker is left heartbroken by Bucha's verbal tirade.

"It was an intense meeting," recalls *Medal Of Honor* writer and producer **Peter Hirschmann**. "Paul came in and laid it out on the table. We just sat there and let him speak. He didn't know anything about the game but laid out a case: 'When it comes to the Medal of Honor, it's a serious and sacred thing; you don't turn it into a videogame. It's an awful thing to do.' He made a really compelling case that we shouldn't be doing this."

At the end of the meeting, *Medal Of Honor* appears to be done for. Even though it's just reached the "release to manufacturing" stage – and DreamWorks has invested millions in its development and production – Spielberg is seriously thinking about cutting his losses. Bucha's blitzkrieg seems to have landed a fatal broadside. Hirschmann respectfully counters with a question: has the decorated war veteran got time for a quick play?

"The Medal of Honor is a sacred thing; you don't turn it into a videogame. It's an awful thing to do"

When DreamWorks set up shop in 1995, "interactive" was Hollywood's favourite buzzword. Every major studio, from Paramount to Universal to Disney, had a newly minted interactive division, and DreamWorks was no exception. Its software segment – staffed by ex-Microsoft employees who'd been lured from Redmond to Hollywood by the glamour and flip-flop weather – focused on developing PC titles. Yet unlike other movie-studio software divisions, DreamWorks Interactive held a trump card: Steven Spielberg.

The bearded director and DreamWorks co-founder recognised the appeal of interactive entertainment earlier than anyone else in Hollywood. Over the years he'd exerted a largely unacknowledged influence over the medium's early evolution, working as an unofficial consultant at both Atari and LucasArts. At DreamWorks Interactive (DWI) he finally had a chance to get some skin in the game personally.



Art director Matt Hall (left) worked on 2010's *MOH* reboot, while writer and producer Peter Hirschmann (right) is now at LucasArts and worked on *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed*

It wasn't a vanity play; more a sign of how much he loved videogames. "I think he was inspired by the invention and toy-like sense of creation and engagement that overtook people in the games business," explains *Medal Of Honor*'s executive producer **Patrick Gilmore**. "He thought games could unlock new ways to tell stories."

The story behind *Medal Of Honor* began, appropriately enough, on the 11th day of the 11th month of 1997. Spielberg, at the time deep in post-production on Saving Private Ryan, outlined his idea for a game to DWI's team. His R-rated movie was too bloody for kids but, inspired by his teenage son Max's love of *GoldenEye*, the director wanted to share his deeply ingrained interest in WWII with younger audiences via videogames.

Addressing the team, he sketched out an ambitious concept: a firstperson shooter for Sony's PlayStation, set in the European theatre of war and named after America's highest military award, the Medal of Honor. Orders given, Spielberg closed the meeting with that boyish grin of his and a parting shot: "I'll be back in a week."

At the time, there was little enthusiasm for the project among DWI's corporate management. Console games weren't DWI's main focus and the PlayStation market wasn't big on the FPS genre. Plus, hard as it is to believe today, World War II was considered passé. "People were really dubious," recalls Hirschmann, "They said, 'World War II is old, it's got cobwebs on it. People want ray guns, hell-spawn and laser rifles.' The idea of doing something with historical relevance set in a low-tech game environment was a challenging sell."

While their peers worked on the much-touted *Small Soldiers* game, Hirschmann's team – "a ragtag group of misfits, very much the underdog institutionally" – spent the next seven days putting together a demo using the engine from their previous project, PlayStation game *Jurassic Park: The Lost World*. "It was a crazy week. We took that renderer and put together a demo with bailing wire and chewing gum," the producer laughs, still amused by the white-knuckle ride that Spielberg set in motion. The demo proved the concept: shooting Nazis was extremely satisfying.

For Steven Spielberg, *Medal Of Honor* was no ordinary licensed movie title, and it shared none of Saving Private Ryan's plot. As a companion piece, though, it shared the film's reverential tone. Early in development, Spielberg told Hirschmann to call up Captain Dale Dye, the retired US Marine officer turned Hollywood military advisor who'd worked with him on Ryan.

"I was like: 'Oh, no, he's gonna think we're a bunch of pencil-necked geeks who don't know what the hell is going on'," recalls Hirschmann. "It turns out he thought we were a bunch of pencil-necked geeks who didn't know what the hell was going on. The last thing he wanted to do was babysit us. It was like, 'Oh, shit' – on both sides."

Dye arrived at DWI's offices in fearsome drill instructor mode, convinced the studio was making, in Hirschmann's words, "an exploitative, tone-deaf, irresponsible thing." Once he saw their intentions were honourable, his mood softened. He became a valuable ally to the team, running them through an impromptu boot camp, calling them out on their military inaccuracies and lending his distinctive, authoritative voice to the game's opening narration.

The training paid off, bolstering the game's sense of historical authenticity. Not just a shoot 'em up, it offers miniature history lessons while you play, offering background on everything from the OSS to the Gestapo to V2 rockets while nostalgic art and video clips convey a sense of the period. The original *Medal Of Honor* remains arguably the most educational FPS ever made.

With the game in development so early in the life of Sony's console – the DualShock

controller hadn't even made its debut – the hardware's technical limitations were a challenge: "We couldn't even show day," laughs art director **Matt Hall**, "so every level is a night mission!" The programming team did their best with what they had. "Enemies had 250 polygons max; it's laughable today," says Hirschmann. "We had a hierarchical animation system that we thought was pretty cutting-edge. We blew our memory budget running that on a console with two megabytes of memory."

The attention to character animation and AI gave the game's combat a raft of emergent possibilities: throw a grenade and a Nazi soldier would try to kick it back at you or dive on it to protect his comrades; wing an enemy and they'd drop their weapon; score a headshot and a helmet would fly off. "To be crass about it," Hirschmann says, "whenever you shot a bad guy, something cool happened." Even the German Shepherd dogs could be made to play "grenade fetch", carrying a tossed explosive device to their unlucky handler.

Max Spielberg, then 14 and today a level designer at EA Los Angeles, remembers being thrilled by the DWI offices when he spent a fortnight doing QA work on the game: "I'd grown up around movie sets and studios, but I'd never felt more excited than walking around DWI. This was a place where they'd use building blocks and green army men to map out the next level. I mean, it was basically taking all my tangible childhood toys and bringing them to life."

As a filmmaker, the elder Spielberg wanted to test the capabilities of interactive entertainment. Ideas like the "show me your papers" scenes – where the player brandishes fake ID papers instead of a gun – were pioneering attempts to expand the scope of the FPS genre.

"Suddenly our interaction with the AI has changed," says the younger Spielberg. "We no longer need to use cover to hide from them. And now we're unsure of how long the disguise will hold, eliciting a state of nervousness and perhaps fear. These changes are mainly cosmetic but by doing so the *Medal Of Honor* team was able to alter the behaviour of the player. This was way back in 1999."

Combining such innovation with the game's fantastic audio design – the ping of a Garand rifle as it runs out of ammo; shouted German phrases; ambient sounds of planes flying overhead; and Michael Giacchino's sweeping score – made it obvious the game was destined for greatness. When Electronic Arts received a demo disc during the Easter of '98, staff traded it around the office all weekend. EA immediately signed up DWI to its Partners Program.

Q&A



Max Spielberg
Level designer,
EA Los Angeles

During your time doing QA on *Medal Of Honor*, what kind of notes did you give your father on the game?
My dad always had this yellow pad in which he kept all of his notes for *MOH*. We would listen to movie scores in the car while going to school and at stoplights he'd write our ideas down. I remember my ideas were always a bit more grotesque than his. He would be thinking big-picture story while I was thinking more along the lines of moment-to-moment gameplay. I do recall one idea he had where if you shot a Nazi while he stood on a balcony, he would flip over the railing and hang on for a second before either climbing back up or falling off to his death. I added the part where you could shoot his hands off while he held on for dear life.

Did you have the sense that *Medal Of Honor* aspired to teach young people about the events of World War II?
From what I saw, that wasn't the point. It was more about taking a cinematic approach to making a game, [about] crafting scripted set-pieces and giving players specific game mechanics to toy with their emotions, and perhaps give them the option of feeling something beyond the simple bloodlust that *Doom* and *Quake* had given us. It was definitely the beginning of the modern FPS.

Then two disasters struck. First was the Columbine massacre, which tainted the public's perception of firstperson shooters overnight. For DreamWorks, the bad PR was potentially disastrous. "A lot of soul searching went on," says Gilmore.

At least one early build of the game had been incredibly gory. "I recall shooting a Panzerschrek [an anti-tank rocket] directly into a Nazi and, as the smoke cleared, all that was left was half his upper torso down to his feet," says Max Spielberg. "He would dance around for a little bit, blood particles squirting from his wounds, and then finally collapse. It was more fitting for an Evil Dead movie than *Medal Of Honor*." Following Columbine, the team pulled all the blood from the game. It was a decision that, regardless of issues of sensitivity, also gave *Medal Of Honor* a more grown-up demeanour.

Controversy has a habit of rolling downhill, however. A few months later, Paul Bucha, the Congressional Medal of Honor Society's president, heard about the game's development and wrote an angry letter to Spielberg Snr. As Hirschmann recalls: "Bucha said, 'What you are doing is terrible. You are dishonouring the Medal of Honor. Please change the name of the game.'"

With the release date looming, DWI was understandably reluctant to comply with the request. However, Steven Spielberg was concerned the issue was just too sensitive. "He was willing at that point to cut his losses and just pull it from the shelves," suggests Hall. It was only Hirschmann's intervention that saved it. "Peter is a really humble guy – he never toots his own horn," continues the art director. "But he saved that franchise. I would wager that well over half the people at DWI didn't know that story."

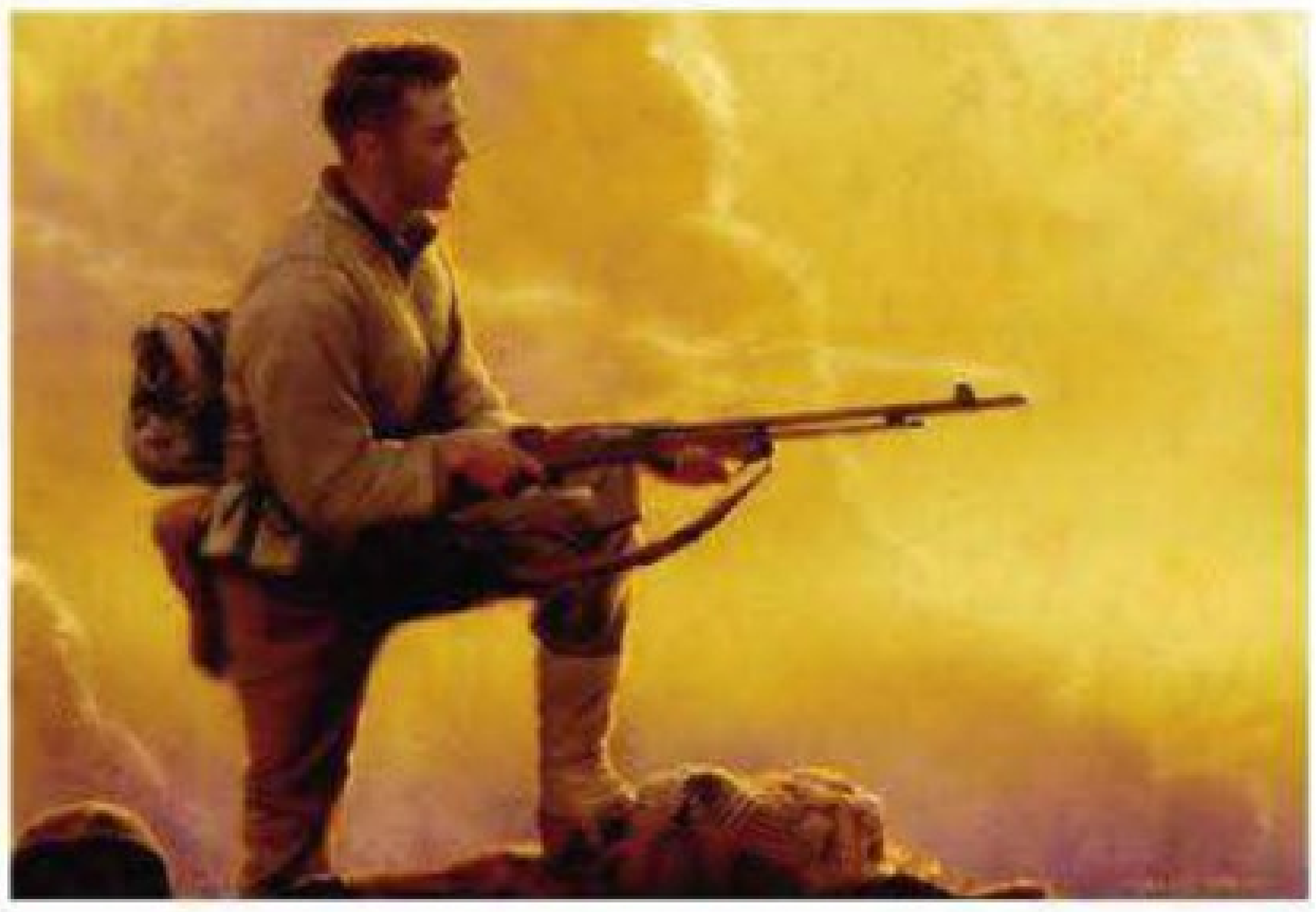
Inviting Bucha to see the game for himself and explaining in detail the team's passion about honouring American military personnel, Hirschmann convinced the Vietnam veteran of the project's weight. Not only did the Society drop their objections to the game, they decided to endorse it too. "I give all credit in the world to Paul Bucha," says Hirschmann. "He had won the conversation but he was willing to listen."

Released in November 1999, *Medal Of Honor* quickly became DWI's most successful title. It was something of a pyrrhic victory, however. DreamWorks' bosses, hit hard by the interactive division's losses, had already put in motion the sale of the company to EA. *Medal Of Honor* has made north of $1 billion in its lifetime, but DWI and Spielberg cashed out before the profits rolled in.

"EA got an incredible deal," reckons Gilmore. "It was the Louisiana Purchase of game-company acquisitions." Spielberg later described the sale as both the "smartest and dumbest" thing he ever did. Despite his regrets, he personally handed out a bonus cheque to the team. Hirschmann, who'd gone far beyond the call of duty, got something even better: a letter of recommendation to Spielberg's friend George Lucas. After working on several *Medal Of Honor* sequels at EA, the producer moved over to LucasArts.

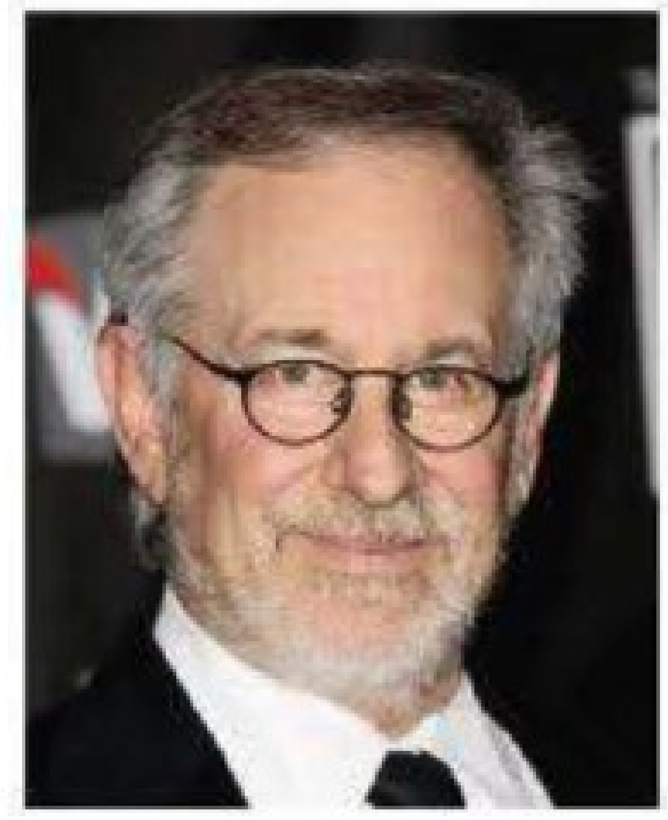
Yet the real legacy of *Medal Of Honor* wasn't its sales or the franchise it launched. It represented something more: the first sign that the videogame medium could support the unique vision of a storyteller like Spielberg. "*Medal Of Honor* is one of the few great marriages of game and film," says the director's son. "It was that first rickety bridge built between the silver screen and the home console."

It was also proof that a videogame could tackle a topic as weighty as World War II with gravitas. "The history of *Medal Of Honor*," says Gilmore, "is in many ways the history of public acceptance of videogames." ■





Shooting Nazis separated *MOH* from its chief inspiration, *GoldenEye*. "There's a difference between shooting hellspawn in *Doom* or Nazis in *MOH*," says project lead Peter Hirschmann. "It's all about context"



Jim Smeal/BEI/Rex Features

Stephen Spielberg was the first major filmmaker to recognise the storytelling potential of games



Beached ambitions

Steven Spielberg's desire to make a war game began much earlier than 1997. Veteran game designer **Noah Falstein**, who met Spielberg during his visits to LucasArts in the early '90s, was DWI's third employee and in 1995 worked on *Normandy Beach* (aka *Beach Ball*), a squad-based game set around the D-Day landings. "My concept was that you would follow two brothers – one assaulting the beach and another who was a paratrooper who came in the night before and landed behind German lines," says Falstein. "You'd go back and forth flipping between missions and 12 days after D-Day the brothers would meet up."

Concerned that players would baulk at a game set 50 years in the past, DWI's management pulled the plug after six months of work. Falstein's contribution didn't go unacknowledged, though: he's included as a character, complete with Hawaiian shirt, in *Medal Of Honor*'s multiplayer.



It wasn't until *Allied Assault* that *MOH* saluted Saving Private Ryan's beach landings, but various nods appear throughout the series

Export strengths

Selling a game in another territory isn't only a matter of translating text. Here, Hello Games explains how it took PSN hit Joe Danger to Japan



"Why is Joe Danger such a typical fat, ugly American?" Of all the anticipated cultural and language problems that taking a western game to Japan could have thrown up, **Sean Murray**, managing director of Hello Games, was still surprised at the question posed by the journalists at Famitsu on his visit to Tokyo last year. "We asked what they meant and they said there seemed to be a lack of imagination with western characters – which you can understand, with 90 per cent of our games featuring a bald-headed muscly man wearing a vest of some sort," he explains. "So they suggested western developers should at least stick with the 'standard' character choice in any game – a beautiful, slightly effeminate man; a sexy girl; and a crazy animal."

As a result of the feedback, *Joe Danger* now offers a choice of characters for players to choose from, including a cheeky monkey and an undead knight, and many Japanese gamers do choose to start with those characters, rather than picking the actual lead character of Joe. This is just one example of the nuances between the culture, language and gaming vocabulary in Japan and the west that are vital to understand when localising any game, and which can have an enormous impact on sales. Just ask Nintendo, which famously released *Super Mario Bros 2* outside of Japan as a version of *Doki Doki Panic* because it felt that the difficulty of the Japanese *Mario* sequel would alienate its western audiences.

Hello Games recently self-published cartoon stunt racer *Joe Danger* in Japan through SCE Japan's PlayStation Network – something that, even a year ago, would have been impossible for indie developers. "Until quite recently we would have had to have been a Japanese company or publish *Joe Danger* through a Japanese publisher that has an office there, for a variety of internal and external Sony reasons, such as ensuring the game has the right local customer support," Murray says. "That's changing now, so you're actually seeing a lot more indie games releasing on PSN, and since Christmas, the Japanese PlayStation Network has its own special area that displays titles from the west."



Hello Games introduced a selection of new characters to *Joe Danger* in order to appeal to Japanese players after the game's original character fell flat during focus tests

After the devastating earthquake and tsunami of March 11 this year, the Japanese game industry, while obviously not neglecting the plight of the survivors, is increasingly passionate about building collaboration and encouraging more western developers to bring their games to the country; not only because in 2008 the total domestic market was worth nearly £4.4bn, but as **Toru Sasaki**, ex-SCE Japan and now overseas sales manager for Active Gaming Media explained, because it's vital for the Japanese economy: "In the short term, please donate what you can through organisations such as the Red Cross, which are taking donations for relief efforts. In the longer term, bringing your games to the Japanese market will encourage the industry there, since many game productions in Japan have been damaged or forced to halt."

> "In the longer term, bringing your games to the Japanese market will encourage the industry there"

You only have to lightly scratch the surface of any western game developer to reveal the maniakku (fanboy 'mania') beneath – there's a genuine warmth and admiration for Japan and the Japanese videogame industry, as Sean Murray attests: "Like pretty much any western games developer, I love Japanese culture. *Joe Danger* was almost a love letter to the Japanese games and studios that I grew up with – *Mario*, *Sonic*, *Crazy Taxi* – those kinds of titles. In my mind, they're the kings of games development, certainly on console."

Murray and the three other developers that make up Guildford-based Hello Games took the decision to bring *Joe Danger* to Japan around the time of a UK Trade and Investment (UKTI) trade mission to the Tokyo Game Show in September 2010. "If we're honest, it was initially just as an excuse to go to TGS, and even then as an excuse to go to Tokyo!" Murray says. "However, *Joe Danger* went down really well there, and got a nice reception in the press, so we started to take the Japanese version much more seriously."

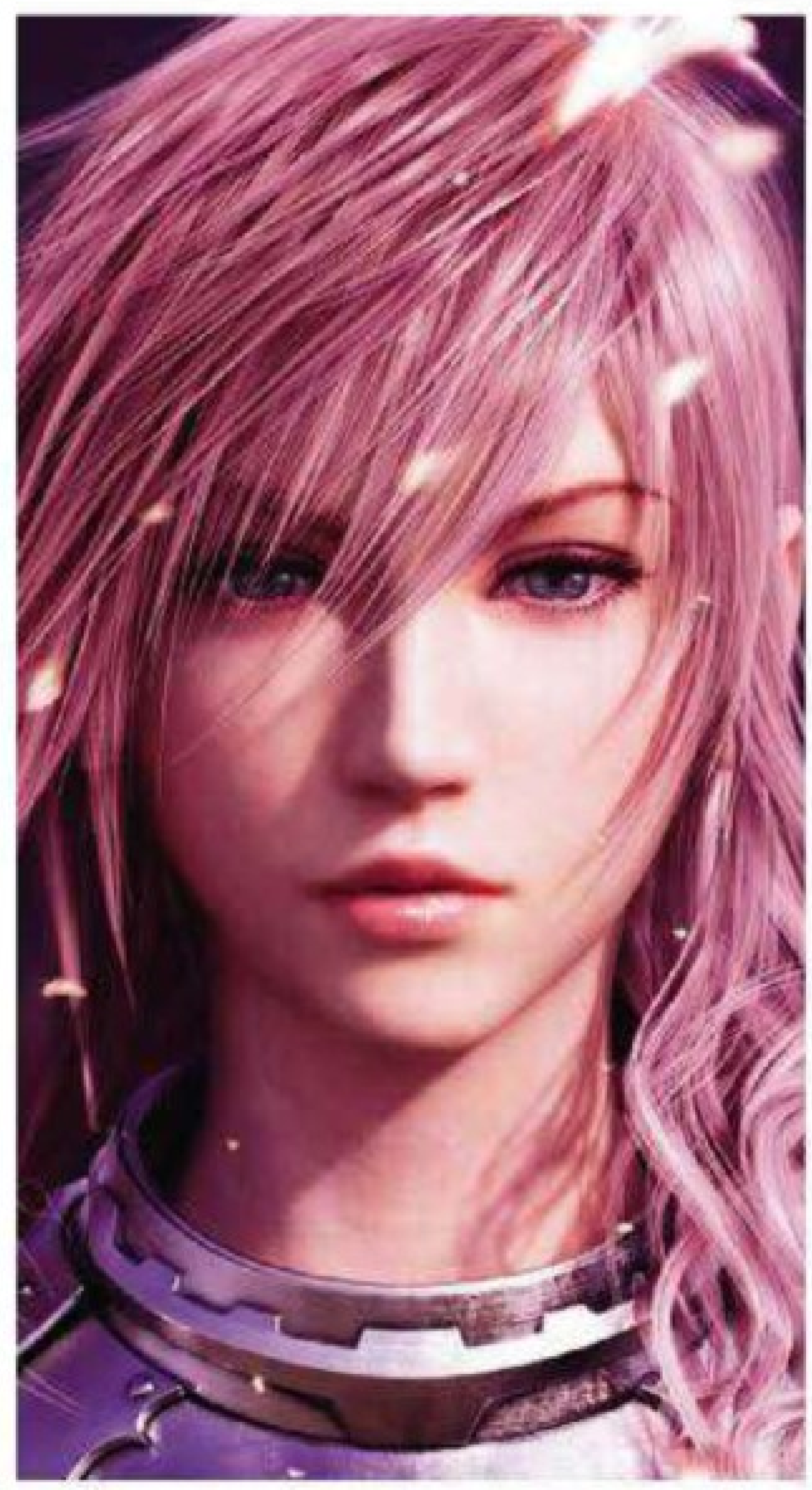
Role call

What are the most popular types of game in Japan today?

It's no real surprise that roleplaying games are the number one choice in Japan – and RPG elements feature heavily in other genres, such as action games – but firstperson shooters, although increasing in popularity year on year, still don't break the top ten, appearing at a Master Chief-denying 14th place, just behind love simulations at 13th.

1. Roleplaying games
2. Action
3. Adventure
4. Strategic simulation
5. Shooting
6. Nurturing simulation
7. Fighting simulation
8. Rhythm-action (music/dance)
9. Puzzle/quiz
10. Racing
11. MMORPG
12. Sports
13. Love simulation
14. Firstperson shooters
15. Sound novel (story with sound)

Source: 2009 CESA Games White Paper



Japanese players have always been attracted to detailed plots, ensuring evergreen sales for the *Final Fantasy* series

So, as a developer without the resources of a major international publisher, how do you begin the process of taking your title to the spiritual home of videogames? "Do your homework on the local market in Japan first," continues Sasaki, who worked with Hello Games on the Japanese iteration of *Joe Danger*. "It may not be possible to build a game with the Japanese audience in mind from the start, but it's always possible to do a little market research before making the decision to break into Japan." Platform choice, for example, is a major factor, because while Xbox 360 had just a four per cent console market share in Japan in 2008, other western-produced hardware finds success in the region – more than two million iPhones have been sold in Japan, for example.

Gaslight Games is another indie looking at the possibility of the Japanese market, and the Bradford company's initial research threw up another important cultural difference between the west and Japan with its tattoo-drawing sim *Skin Ink*. "After conversations with the Japanese UKTI, we got an insider view on Japanese tattooing culture, and that a lot of the older generation in Japan would associate traditional western-style tattoos as being linked with the Yakuza crime syndicate," says director **Mark Jawdoszak**. "But interestingly, we found out that we may have a niche audience for our game with firefighters, who also have a lot of tattoos in their culture."

It's no wonder that localisation is evolving into the 'culturalisation' of games, and that taking a game to any country involves considerably more than simply translating the text – there's a much deeper layer of translation that has to be considered. **Marek Walton** is director of culturalisation at The Mustard Corporation and has worked extensively on bridging the game culture gap between the west and Japan: "A lot of things we have to fix are from misunderstood cultural references – you need to be aware of them, and if they're not going to be understood, does that really matter?"



***Skin Ink*, the debut title from Bradford's Gaslight Games, was the winner of a competition held by graphics tablet manufacturer Wacom. It's free for Bamboo tablet owners**

Unsolved Crimes, a DS title from Japanese developer Now Production Company, was brought from Japan to the western videogame market by Walton, who found that, apart from discovering a couple of misplaced British 'Bobbies' in a New York police department, the other major cultural issue was ensuring that the puzzles had a logic that the western gaming audience could understand. "Logic in Japan can be culturally different, very intricate by design," Walton explains. "For example, compare the detailed plot of one of the *Final Fantasy* games with the not-so-detailed storyline of *Gears Of War*. You have to make sure that things have a simpler, compelling whole. Not to dumb it down, just to make it less complicated. Do you really have to know about 28 different ways to cook a fish?"

> "The Japanese games industry is very much focused on perfection, rather than straight innovation"

All this costs money. A small amount of text translation – a mobile game, for example – can cost £500–£1,000, whereas a beefier XBLA/PSN title can cost between £1,000–£5,000 – and if you factor in additional costs of recording voices needed for certain games, you can be looking at a minimum bill of around £15,000–£20,000. However, the process for Hello Games, while sometimes difficult, has been rewarding in other ways, such as in beginning to understand the very different development and business practices in Japan. "One of the companies there said in Japan nothing is more valued than being able to clone something and improve it – the Japanese games industry is very much focused on perfection, rather than straight innovation," Murray says. "The example given was if you've ever played a *Zelda* game, you'll know you're going to get the hook shot halfway through. The methodology of the game and the design doesn't change that much at all, but every iteration is improved from the last. The bigger companies' focus on casual titles is why many developers we met out there felt the games business had declined in Japan – a constant topic wherever we went was how casual *Mario Kart Wii* had become and how it wouldn't be played in Japan any more."


Sean Murray
Managing director, Hello Games


Toru Sasaki
Overseas sales manager, Active Gaming Media


Mark Jawdoszak
Games director, Gaslight Games


Marek Walton
Director of culturalisation, The Mustard Corporation



Japan's iterative design culture, exemplified by the *Zelda* series, gives an opportunity for western devs to make a mark

Sasaki also confirms this conservatism in Japanese gameplaying culture, and that players in the UK and the west are more willing to explore the unexpected (see 'Role call'). "Japanese players enjoy a certain degree of linearity in their gameplay, and prefer having set schedules made in advance – the effects of which can be seen in the prevalent reuse of classic story arcs in popular media like manga



and TV dramas," he says. "If things are too different from the expected mould, they won't resonate as strongly with audiences in Japan."

Viewed from the point of view of a self-publishing western developer, the large amount of research and market knowledge required for a successful launch in Japan can seem daunting, but there is help in the UK from a surprising quarter – the government. As mentioned already, UK Trade And Investment has an excellent track record encouraging the export of the UK's game industry to countries including South Korea, China and the US, and has taken more than 120 companies to Japan over the past decade through trade missions based around the Tokyo Game Show – whose date for 2011 was recently confirmed as September 15-18. "Being in a group and having the back-up of the British Embassy added real weight to what we were doing," Murray says. "Having interpreters to work with, and local knowledge specifically about the games industry, was incredibly useful – our first day there we had meetings with the president of SCE Japan and the president of Square Enix, something I could have never arranged on my own."



The Mustard Corporation localised DS game *Unsolved Crimes* (above) for the west. Meanwhile, in Japan, local developers bemoan the direction taken by series such as *Mario Kart*



You could write the plot to *Gears Of War* on the back of a stamp, but do Fenix's motivations matter to westerners?

While developers have to pay to take part in the missions, there are special offers through industry bodies such as the UK-based TIGA, and in the past (before the spectre of austerity cuts) some UK regional development agencies, such as Yorkshire Forward, funded companies up to 50 per cent of their travel, hotel and entry fee costs to events such as the Game Developers Conference in San Francisco. For all western indie developers, it's absolutely worth doing some research to enquire about financial support for trade incentives in your particular territory. Murray also encourages other indies interested in this market to get in touch with Hello as well: "Not because we're experts – we've made pretty much every mistake you can – but because it's a difficult process and we can pass on our experiences."

One such example is with Japanese game certification. In Europe, when submitting a game for certification, PEGI asks for a fairly flat description of the gameplay, but in Japan, CERO may need much more detailed information on the actual backstory of your game. "They wanted to know what was Joe Danger's motivation – why was he riding this bike and collecting coins?" says Murray. "That was really interesting to us – that CERO base their rating on that, as much as what you're doing in the game."

Japan is slowly rebuilding after the horrific events of the recent natural disaster, but the region offers increasing opportunities for western developers, especially indies looking to self-publish – if they are prepared to do the research and look at the whole process as one of both cultural and language translation. The fact that the potential financial rewards are beneficial for both the game companies and the Japanese economy can only be positive – as it has been for Hello Games and a certain fat, ugly American. "We heard time and again that Japanese games developers have a respect and admiration for the innovation and risk in the west to build new IPs, which is something Japan isn't doing as much," Murray concludes. "We certainly felt very welcomed going there and there was a lot of curiosity about how we develop games and how the companies were run – there's a growing openness in Japan." ■

Talking tips

We ask **Iris Ludolf** of translation/localisation specialist Partnertrans what advice she would offer a developer setting out to localise its games for overseas regions in today's market. "Obviously it depends on the size of the game and the platform," she says. "I'd give MMO developers different advice than a developer of a small mobile game. But I'd tell both that localisation is indeed very important and that text run through online translation programs just doesn't cut the mustard. A lot of developers translate their text with Google Translate and similar tools, resulting in marketing texts on iTunes that might make the potential buyers laugh, but they won't prompt them to buy the game – actually, that is something I've already experienced myself. The same thing goes for screenshots on iTunes with localised text or ads/marketing text for Facebook games. If the potential buyer sees how bad the translation is, he is much less likely to buy the game.

"Also, it's very important to use only translators who are native in the target language and know the local customs and who know gamers' terminology – or agencies who pay attention to that detail with the translators they assign to projects. Otherwise you can find the word 'chip' in your poker game translated as 'chips' to eat, or the 'plate' part in your plate mail translated as the plate you eat from!

"And, as I say, for big titles, either a potential AAA game or a big MMO, I would tell the client to seek help from a culturalisation specialist, which should be involved as early as possible, even in the game planning process, so that their title will be a success in all targeted markets and doesn't have to be pulled from the shelves after the release. One example I know of is where the player had to choose his country within the game and Taiwan was listed as a country – including the official flag. This really didn't sit well with the powers that be in China, so that game was taken off the shelves over there. If you only send out the texts to the translators, these issues would never be noticed until it's too late."


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CLINT HOCKING

The elephants in the room (part five): All ships rise with the tide

There are two schools of thought that pertain to the flow of information.

The dominant school of thought is that information flow should be strictly controlled. That copyright, trademark and the ownership of knowledge and information drives competition, incentivises innovation and leads to growth of the industry.

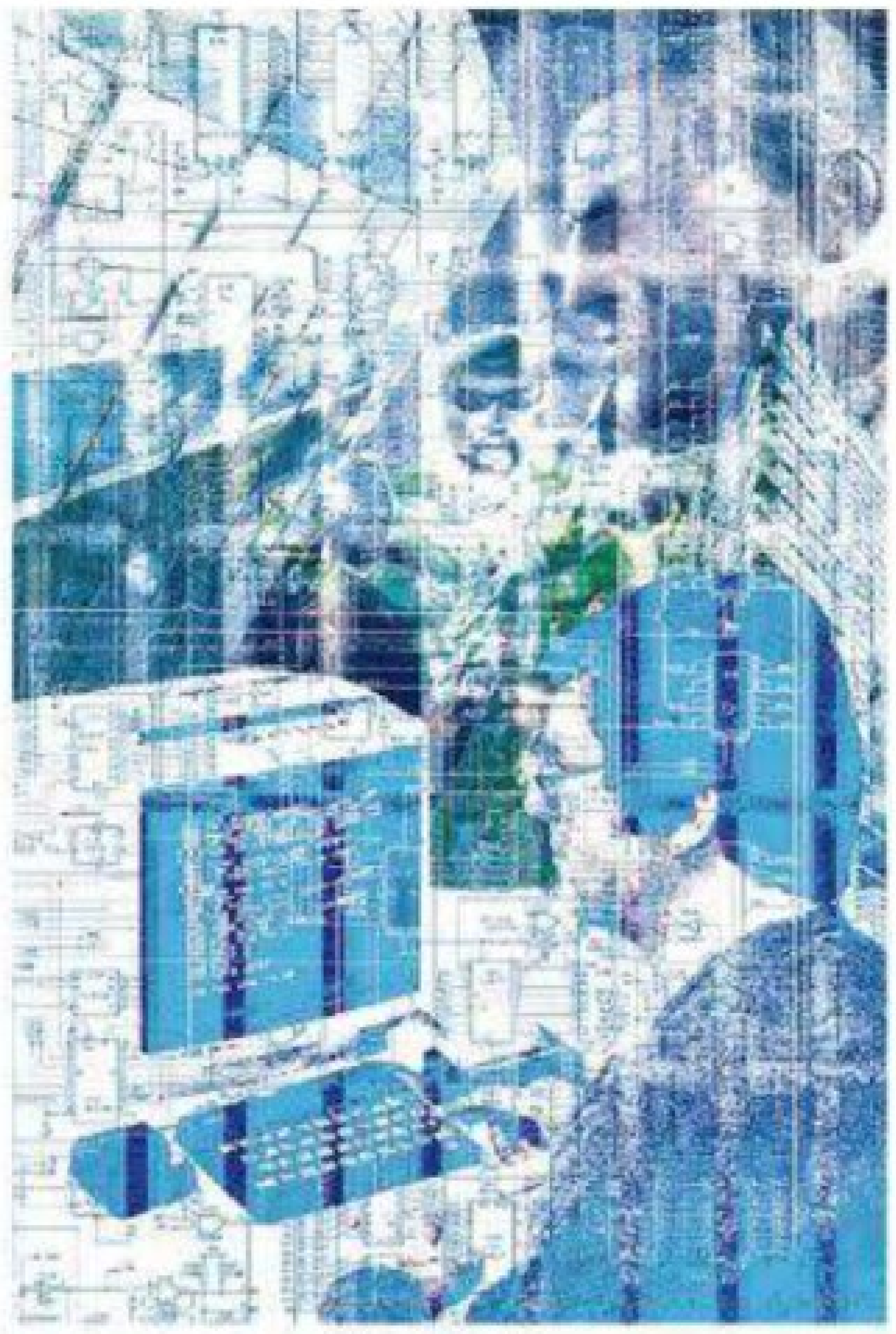
The other school of thought is that information should be allowed to flow unhindered, that all ideas should be free and freely distributable and that no one should be able to own information. This school proposes that "all ships rise with the tide" and that growth is a side effect of everyone working with open access to the infinitely renewable and always expanding resource of information out there.

Game developers historically tended to subscribe to the second school of thought.

Nearly 50 years ago, when computer gaming was born, gaming was a kind of closeted hobby, and the first computer gamers were in fact the first game developers; physics and engineering students in universities who hacked their school machines to play games of their own creation. This hacker mentality and DIY attitude became part of the core philosophy of early game development.

Long before games were distributed via Steam, years before Blu-ray, DVD, CD, or even floppy, game code was printed in specialty magazines and indie 'zines. Gamers would retype (and would usually need to debug) the magazine printouts of the code into their own computers to play a game – the line between gamer and developer could not have been more blurred.

As games grew in complexity and started to find their way into the pizza parlours and living rooms of the world, there arose a need to draw a line between gamer and game developer. Any dude with a quarter could play a game, but increasingly you needed a degree and access to some expensive hardware to actually make a game. But developers always seemed to find a way to leave the door open for gamers to participate in the making of games. From the earliest level editors like the *Lode Runner* editor,



Developers always seemed to find a way to leave the door open for gamers to participate in the making of games

then later to the *Wolfenstein* level editor, the *Doom* engine, the *Duke 3D* tools, and eventually to today's Unreal Engine, developers have consistently gone the extra mile to enable the free flow of ideas, information and creativity.

In parallel to all this growth, and in large part facilitating it, there came, paradoxically, and at times problematically, the game industry. I say 'paradoxically' because industries tend to subscribe to the first school of thought regarding the flow of information and the game industry is no exception.

The game industry brings with it economies of scale that allow exploration and development of new technologies and designs simply not possible at smaller scales. It also brings a broad market reach that can bring games to thousands of times more players than could otherwise be reached normally. In exchange for the advantages industry provides, it needs to protect its information and intellectual property.

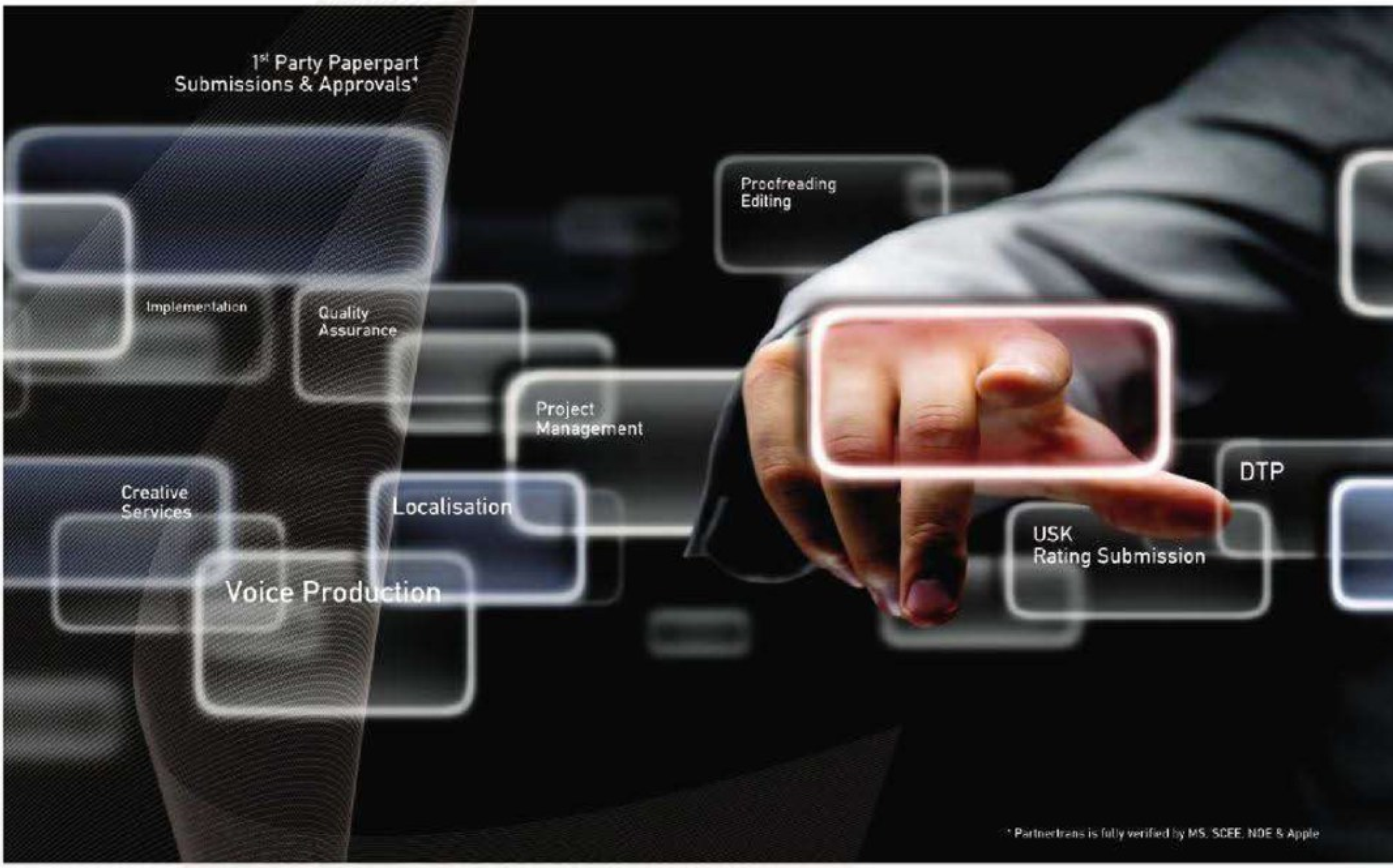
This leads us to a conflict between what game developers are and what the game industry is. But I think that it's a healthy conflict; one that keeps us all honest, and that, properly respected, makes us all stronger.

I believe there is both good and bad in the free flow of information. I believe rather strongly in knowledge sharing, and the open communication of best practices through the proper forums of industry conferences such as GDC, or through university partnerships. I believe in the totally unhindered flow of theoretical information. On the contrary, I do not believe in sharing code or data that belongs to the 'corporation'.

At the same time, along with these right and wrong interpretations of the free flow of information, I also think that there are right and wrong interpretations of the protection of information. I believe in NDAs and other protectionist clauses in contracts as far as they protect 'hard' intellectual property such as code or data, but I don't think that these clauses should be extensible to protect ideas, theory, or even the sharing (within the proper forums) of soft concepts, such as best practices, that potentially improve the lives of our workers and creators.

In the end, while the hacker ethic of game developers seems potentially to be at odds with the responsibility that corporations have to their shareholders, I think that this isn't often the case. As long as we have a nearly infinite design space for people to explore, there's no reason for either side to attempt to wrestle control of information flow from the other side. While our friends in the microchip manufacturing industry and our other friends in the disc manufacturing industry may constantly be concerned with the hard physical limits on the edge of their design spaces, we have a long way to go before these sorts of external pressures could drive a wedge between us.

Clint Hocking is a creative director at LucasArts working on an unannounced project. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com


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CREATE
INSIGHT

The Possibility Space



RANDY SMITH

What makes Sword & Sworcery so crazy and awesomely cool?

In which I enlist Tiger Style's Theron Jacobs to help me figure out why Capybara's recently released iPad game *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP* is so rad.

RS *Sword & Sworcery EP*, bro. It's hip. I can imagine a mixed group of 20-somethings wearing trendy clothings sitting around drinking beers and playing it together. I want to examine this idea of games being 'cool'. Comparatively, most games are so dorky.

TJ Most mainstream stuff is pretty dorky, regardless of medium. What separates *S&SEP*? It is explicitly intended as 'a cure for acute soul sickness'. The game works as something of an antidote to bombast and space marines. Its music, by a celebrated artist, was released on vinyl to a hungry audience. Its design incorporated Twitter, allowing us to share as we play the game in realtime, creating a sense of community, of common experience. It appears fluent in contemporary culture; I don't know of any other games which reference Twin Peaks.

RS The abstract geometry of the trigons set against a representational world is hip and fresh without being a reference to anything in particular. These are just dudes with good taste and a flair for bringing it into their work. It seems like an odd miscalculation that there has not been art like this in a videogame previously.

TJ There couldn't have been; it is fundamentally concerned with expropriating the styles and themes of the video games of the mid-'80s, a knowing retrospective of classic tropes. Also, it is only masquerading as pixelated. Like a clever winkyface façade, it overtly displaces itself 'outside' the game and instead seeks a place within the broader cultural landscape around it. The visual stylings are just a part of this.

RS Yes! The writing is at times like quality literature ("a parliament of trees at the heart of the world") and at times crassly familiar ("was totally floored by how awesome and crazy the fight was"), often in the same breath.

TJ It's the common parlance of early 21st century Americans. Not ancient Scythians.

RS Similarly the art depicts themes of hearty spiritual substance: delicate waterfalls, majestic deer, moonlight reflected in the lake, a bipedal monster with his dong dangling around understatedly. We hear chirping night insects, cracking fires, the screams of invisible victims. The story trafficks in epic fantasy: the quest for the book, the taming of the beast, the martyry sacrifice. And yet the treatment throughout is silly and lackadaisical.



It seems like an odd miscalculation that there has not been art like this in a videogame previously

TJ They seem to be so aware at all times of themselves. It's less like the game breaks the forth wall and more like it's sitting on the other side of it with us, watching over our shoulder.

RS "This is totally awesome," the game says, which suggests both that it means it – since the artists put so much effort into creating such beautiful texture – and also that it means *something else* because "this is totally awesome" is not how one talk about things that actually are totally awesome, like nuclear explosions or the best work of art of all time. What is that something else?

TJ It's got that slight ironic remove so common to this particular moment in culture. You know. That new irony. The sort that recognises how ridiculous things are and celebrates them at the same time. That's the something else, and that's what makes it hip.

RS It's at once a depiction of important things worthy of our attention and a reaction to them. Both a videogame as a work of art and an instruction manual for how to feel about the art.

TJ It's almost an interactive story about the adventure videogames of our youth. Playable meta-commentary.

RS The ubiquity of the themes is what makes it really about games in general, beyond this one specifically. It resonates with us and we agree! Yes! That is how to think about videogames! But what does that mean about being hip? That we don't really care about anything? No, I say. It is how we respond to a world saturated with media constantly attempting to depict important things right at us.

TJ Classic games strive for immersion and ask for their players to lend them their earnest efforts within the frame of the game's narrative.

RS The cover is a big strong guy pointing guns at the camera and sneering. Later he walks away from an explosion without looking at it. How could the creators possibly expect us to take that at face value and be moved?

TJ They can't. Spend enough time on the internet and everything which is earnest and takes itself seriously seems antiquated and out of touch. I believe this to be a broad phenomenon. It's what is happening right now to us as a species and how we relate to information.

RS Hip games want you to know it's just a piece of media but to celebrate that we like media and can immerse ourselves in its important topics while recognising that immersion in media is a little silly.

Theron Jacobs and Randy Smith are collaborators in Tiger Style, whose first game, Spider, is available at the App Store. Read the unedited transcript of this dialogue at bit.ly/jU7ugz


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Word play



JAMES LEACH

Begged, stolen or borrowed, inspiration never comes from a single source

Where do the ideas for games come from? Well, for a start they don't usually get thrown into the ring as one-line pitches. You can do that with movies because movies – all movies – are more similar to each other than games are. A movie is just a story; a game is an experience.

Rarely can one person alone claim to have come up with a game idea – and people who have nothing more than an overarching concept are not going to get listened to. Not long ago, a fan collared Peter Molyneux at a show and told him that they had a great idea for a game. Molyneux replied that he himself had a great idea for a painting. It was a good answer in some respects – ideas are worth practically nothing. You can think up six astonishing game narrative concepts before breakfast.

No, the ideas behind the creation of new games are so often based in the mechanics. The place to start is a new and satisfying way of doing things. Look at *LittleBigPlanet*: there's a game that's not actually about anything. But it's a fulfilling world in which any number of stories and experiences can be played out.

Creative writers in the industry often wail about how stories, plot and narrative structure are added to games later in their construction. But if games are thought up and created around cool things the player can do, that's always going to be the case. It'd be nice if it wasn't too late, though. And didn't change. All the time. But these are games – telling the story doesn't come first.

So if mechanics and gameplay are king, why do so many games seem to be like films? Once development has started, game design often borrows, and has always borrowed, from film and TV. How could it not, when every programmer and designer watches sci-fi, and every artist is in love with comic books and superheroes? There's a long-distinguished tradition of developers immersing themselves in their favourite genres and rocking up at the crack of ten the next morning, determined to implement what they saw the night before.

And arguably there's little wrong with this. It's can be a useful shorthand. Would *Max Payne*'s bullet time have worked if we hadn't seen The



If Lara Croft had been a middle-aged bloke in a hat, things would have gone very differently for her creators

Matrix? Would *StarCraft*'s wisecracking marines and female pilots have been as cool without James Cameron's Aliens? Would *Gears Of War* have worked as well? And grab a pen and list the games influenced by Giger. You may write on both sides of the paper. If the player understands the world from the outset, it makes it so much easier for them to get into the game. Everybody knows about explosions and shockwaves and fireballs from films, so we're all on the same page.

Nowadays orcs, mech suits and warp jumps are public domain. They don't need explaining. Like telescopic sights or lasers, we're totally au fait with such things. You could call each a sci-fi convention if, er, that wasn't something else. Such familiarity becomes a problem, though.

First, the game has to do the reference justice. Second, things date. Ironically, the more original an idea, the more likely it is to look passé at a later point. The aforementioned bullet time is a prime example. And third, there's a fine line between borrowing cool concepts and simply copying. If Lara Croft had been a middle-aged bloke in a hat, things would have gone very differently for her creators.

It's not just weapons and characters that draw on film. The universal rules of cinematography and plot do so as well – they have to. Cutscenes, for example, need to adhere to filmic principles. Similarly, plots and story also usually track the three-act structure and the Hero's Journey. These rules exist because they work. Of course, some of the best movie-making bends or even breaks these rules and makes a virtue of doing so. This doesn't happen in games, though, for two reasons: first, clever storytelling and plot manipulation won't turn a poor or even a mediocre game into a masterpiece. Games are not about storytelling, remember. And second, games are far more linear experiences. Progression is everything, so you're largely stuck with moving from one bit to the next.

As games look and feel more like movies, they increasingly ape – and run the risk of being stifled by – movie convention. You can only be influenced by things that already exist, so you're always one step behind. When the new set-pieces start emerging in 3D film, as they surely will, you can bet they'll be giving kids headaches on a 3DS near you soon afterwards. It could be called copying, it could be simply keeping sensibly to the convention. Hey, go the whole hog, imitate something enough and you can call it a homage. The up-to-the-minute *LA Noire* celebrates its '40s and '50s movie heritage with pride.

Sometimes we get the games the developers want to make. Sometimes the games may be the films they want to make. If it works, it works, though. And arguably it's the icing on the cake. But I'm sure that if story, themes and gameplay fail to work together well enough, we keep our wallets closed. *Psychonauts*, anyone?


James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer who works on games and for ad agencies, TV, radio and online






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Region Specific: Finland

From cold northern latitudes comes a red-hot dev scene

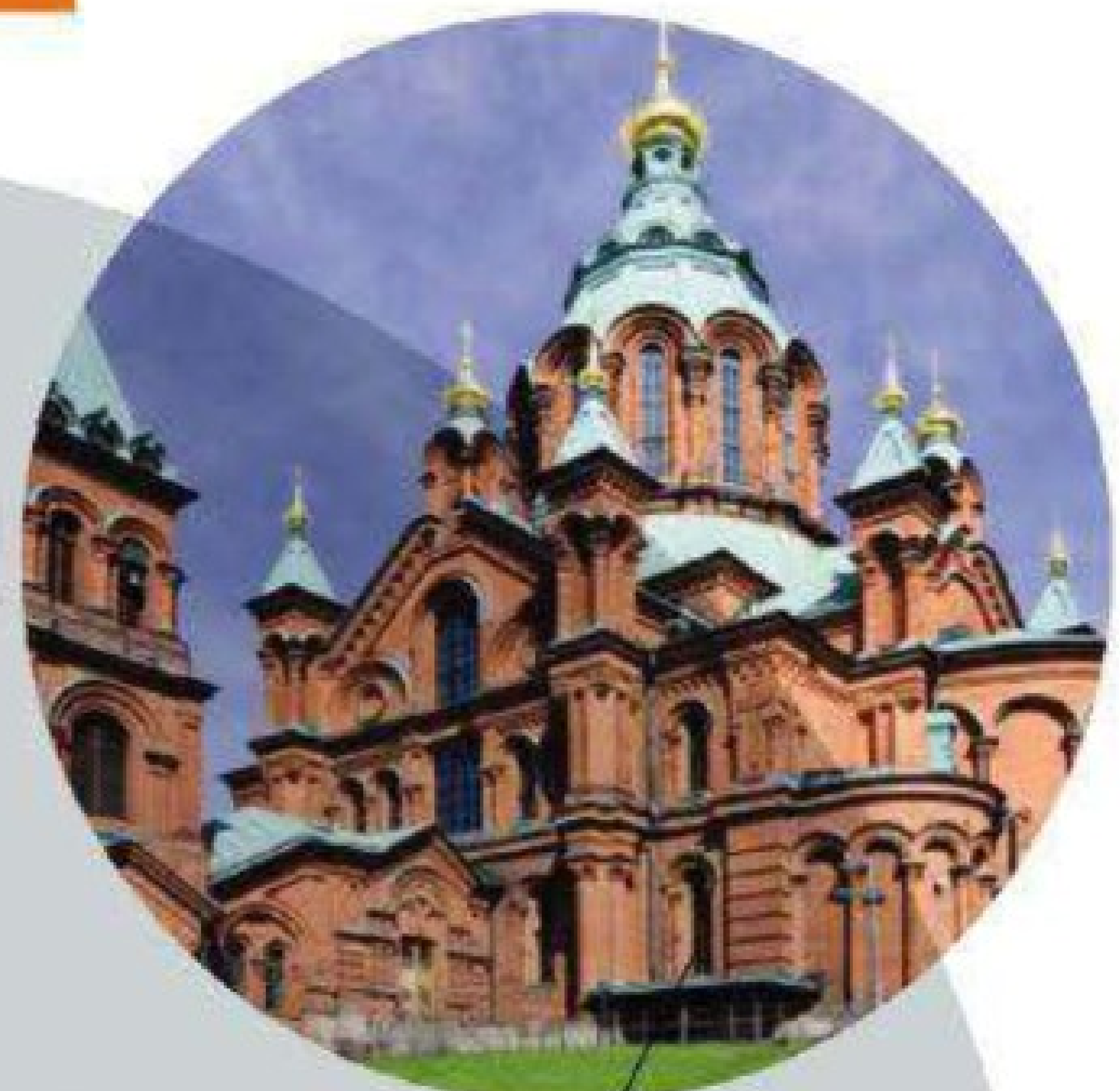
The game industry at the heart of Finland (1) has been quietly working away for the past 15 years in relative anonymity, consistently producing world-beating technology and games but seeing little need to crow about it. That's beginning to change, as our discussions (2) reveal. With digital distribution and the rapid rise of mobile gaming, the country's streamlined studios have found new routes to market, often defining those markets in the process. Rovio's inescapable *Angry Birds* (3) has been downloaded over 100 million times across its various formats, becoming a poster child for iOS in the process. Consider XBLA and it's all but impossible not to think of RedLynx's physics-based motorcycle game *Trials HD* (4) along with it. Futuremark leads the way when it comes to 3D, PC and mobile benchmarking, and with 2009's *Shattered Horizon* (5) branched out into games. Housemarque has championed PSN from the beginning, and with *Super Stardust HD* and *Dead Nation* (6) it is responsible for two of the service's most popular games. Frozenbyte's wry sense of humour and highly polished output with titles such as *Trine* (7) has seen it build an intensely loyal fanbase. And finally, Remedy can lay claim to popularising bullet-time with its *Max Payne* titles, while its *Alan Wake* (8) demonstrated a deft talent for toying with players' expectations.




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1



2

THE FUTURE CREW



From origins in the vibrant '90s demoscene has emerged one of Europe's most creative dev centres



3

5



4



LANDMARKS
1 An autumn morning on Kaitalampi lake in Espoo, Finland 2 The Uspenski Cathedral, a beautiful landmark of Helsinki. 3 The Esplanade, Helsinki's stylish boulevard and lively park. 4 The island fortress of Suomenlinna, near Helsinki 5 The Finnish National Opera building in Helsinki

Bring almost any game to mind and more often than not, you'll be able to stick a pin into a mental map marking where it came from. Be it Lionhead's resolutely British *Fable* series, for example, Activision's all-American *Call Of Duty* titles or even the esoteric output of defunct French studio Delphine, games evoke a sense of origin. But despite its prolific output, most would be hard pressed to identify many games heralding from the Nordic country of Finland.

This is due, in no small part, to an international focus stamped not just into the DNA of developers here, but of nearly every Finn. Finland has a population of only 5.4 million and, as we learn, the small domestic market provided by this modest population means that companies from every sector are looking outwards to the global market. More than that, high localisation costs result in the nation's children watching films and TV, listening to music and playing games in English.

None of the studios we visit during our trip lament any lack of national identity in the games they produce. The commercial benefits of appealing to so large an audience contribute to their contentment, but the focus on making titles that are streamlined, high-quality and fun has pushed patriotism to the back of their minds.

"It's important that we get the word out to professionals in the industry that we have a viable ecosystem here; if you come to work for a company you will have other opportunities as well," explains Remedy Entertainment CEO **Matias Myllrinne** when we suggest that companies here are missing a trick when it comes to putting Finland on the map. "But in terms of end consumers, we're not going to be communicating Finland. There's enough to take in with: 'By the way, it's *Alan Wake* from Remedy, published by Microsoft.' By the time you get around to '…and we're from Finland,' it isn't really vital. The end consumer doesn't really care – and why should they? They buy into the brand. Nokia's slogan is 'Connecting People,' it's not 'Nokia: from Finland, by the way.'"

Rovio's **Petri Järvilehto**, one of the exponents for the highly active mobile development scene that has grown around Nokia's presence, echoes Myllrinne's sentiment: "If you look at *Angry Birds*, do [Rovio] care more about that in itself becoming a big brand or do we necessarily associate it with where it's coming from? Obviously we want to push the brand to centre stage as much as possible, and any extra information you attach to the brand makes it harder to communicate that."



Home to 588,000 people, Helsinki is Finland's busiest city

There are no egos here, only an admirable dedication to making truly great games. It's an ironic situation given that many of Finland's development community cut their teeth in the demoscene during the '90s, a subculture built around showing off. Indeed, companies such as Remedy, benchmarking company Futuremark and Bugbear Entertainment (which is currently working on *Ridge Racer Unbounded*) were all founded by members of a famous demo group, Future Crew.

There are no egos here, an ironic situation given that the community cut their teeth in the demoscene during the '90s, a subculture built around showing off

Regardless of where it came from, one of the upshots of this humility is a remarkable adherence to democracy within company structuring. While all the familiar job titles exist, every developer we visit is distinctly proud of its meritocratic culture. Each voice is listened to, no matter how junior, and there is a familial atmosphere throughout, the sincerity of which remains consistently surprising. *Trine* developer Frozenbyte takes this even further, gathering around a large table each day to share meals created by the studio's full-time cook as well as making long-standing employees 'owners', with a small stake in the company. Meanwhile, *Trials HD* developer RedLynx shares royalty payments with its individual teams.

A quick glance at the studio profiles over the following pages points to another contributing factor for the close bonds enjoyed here: small teams. Even Rovio, though expanding fast, still has just 60 employees – only social entertainment company and *Habbo Hotel* creator Sulake's staff numbers in the hundreds. But don't let all this talk of relaxed structuring and close-knit families imply a lackadaisical work ethic – far from it. Finland's development community is one of the most motivated and productive we've seen, every studio working on multiple projects, with a focus on polish and purity of gameplay that is more often associated with larger Japanese studios.

RedLynx's dangerously compulsive *Trials HD* is the ostensibly simple fusion of bike, physics and explosives, for example, while Remedy's action adventure *Alan Wake*, despite its high production values and sophisticated narrative, still comes down to a robust combat mechanic and the opposition of light and dark. Housemarque's popular download titles repackage Amiga-era twitch gaming for today's more sophisticated hardware, marrying exquisite visuals to unburdened gameplay. And, as if a clearer example were needed, Rovio's *Angry Birds* takes the ethos to, perhaps, its natural limits.

Finland's technology-savvy society means that support for the game industry is strong. Tekes, the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation, is a publicly funded organisation that finances research, development and innovation in the country. Each year, it aims to support around 1,500 business R&D projects, and everyone we meet attributes their strong in-house technology to the organisation. Similarly, nearly all the members of the Finnish development community are also members of trade and research association Neogames, which works to publicise the industry's successes at home and abroad while providing new business opportunities for its members.

With its strong foundations and wide reach into international markets, it seems likely that the growth of Finland's game industry will accelerate as it continues to take advantage of digital distribution and its developers' reputation among international publishers. Whether this expansion will see the region's profile become more prominent in the minds of players is another matter – but with games as good as these, perhaps it really doesn't matter, after all. ■



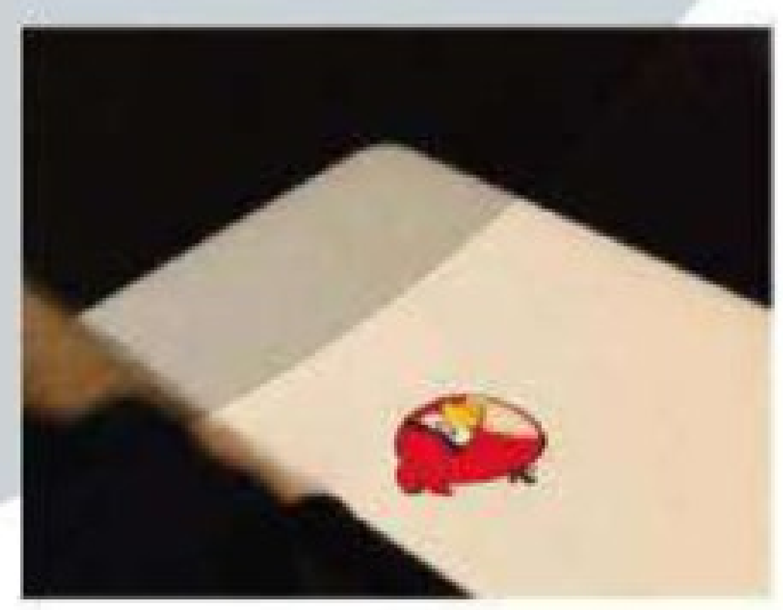


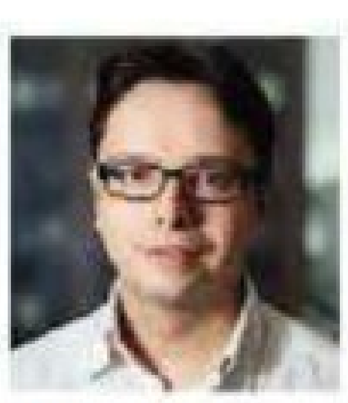
ROUND THE TABLE



Finland's most successful game developers on their reputation for polish and clarity, and hatred of pigs







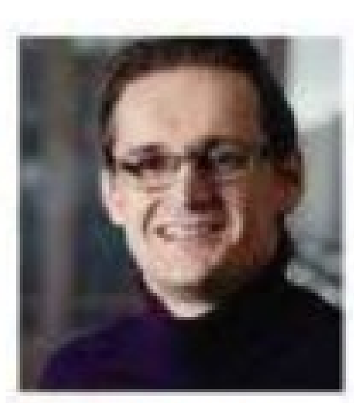
Tero Virtala
CEO, RedLynx



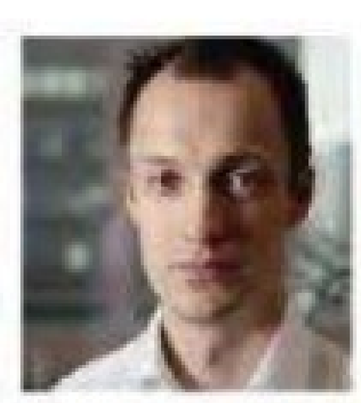
Petri Järvilehto
SVP of console development, Rovio



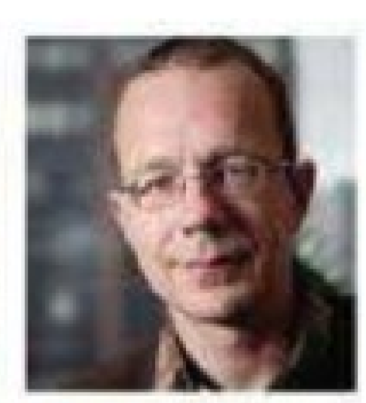
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Tuomas Henttonen
Senior technology adviser, Tekes



Mikeal Haveri
Sales and marketing manager, Frozenbyte

One indicator of the close relationships enjoyed by Finland's various studios is that the exchange of business cards which usually takes place when we gather developers together for Region Specific discussions doesn't occur. Everyone here knows each other and all are welcomed to RedLynx's premises as old friends, not just guests. That assembly consists of RedLynx CEO **Tero Virtala**, Futuremark CEO **Jukka Mäkinen**, Remedy CEO **Matias Myllrinne**, Neogames' **KooPee Hiltunen**, Frozenbyte sales and marketing manager **Mikeal Haveri**, Housemarque CEO **Ilari Kuittinen**, Rovio SVP of console development **Petri Järvilehto** and funding agency Tekes' senior technology adviser **Tuomas Henttonen**. Shoes left by the door, we get started.

Why is Finland so good at producing cutting-edge technology and development studios?

Jukka Makinen I think the demoscene from the early '90s is a key factor in generating talent in this country.

Matias Myllrinne A lot of the companies have their roots in the demoscene. Now we have more calculating power in our phones than we did in our computers, those guys are right at home!

Tero Virtala Thousands of young kids with development potential means there's an excellent workforce for Finland. But I actually think there is one more reason dating back even further: because Finland as a nation, for some reason, has been a very technology-oriented society for a long time. Our schooling system is good, but it also focuses a lot on technical subjects like maths, physics and computer sciences. Every one of us here was bought computers when we were small; our parents had no idea if those computers could be used for anything, but it was new technology so the feeling was that kids should have them in case they might turn out to be beneficial later!

KooPee Hiltunen Another factor is that Finnish culture is quite pro-games. We don't have the kind of obstacles Germany has, for instance – constant discussion about violence, or something like that.

MM I think we're also in a lucky position in terms of size, in that we've never been burdened with a domestic market. If you look at development in the larger markets, they've had a domestic market and they've focused on that, whereas all of us around this table have gone global from day one. And North America, I think, is the biggest market for everyone here.

Ilari Kuittinen Maybe that's also related to the cultural thing. We embrace western culture much more than some of the bigger European countries, so we have a big UK and American influence in our culture, and all of us grew up watching the same TV series that everybody else was.

Jukka Makinen And we are OK with birds attacking pigs. [Laughter.]

TV At the moment, the Finnish game industry is employing around 1,200 people. That's a good number in a country as small as Finland. But I think this development has been possible *because* the country is so small. When those first success stories started, and those first companies started to rise – Remedy, Housemarque, Bugbear – in the '90s, in some bigger countries they might not have been that significant. Here they were noticed and a lot of the potential next generation of entrepreneurs became interested in the industry. But in the late '90s I don't think it was possible for many newcomers to enter the console space, though fortunately there were small mobile games with Nokia – a lot of those companies could hone their skills. Now, finally, the market has changed and I think we are seeing the result of ten years of this experience.

KH It's very true that success creates success. When you have one success story, it's easier for other companies to trust that they are also able to do it. And I think that Remedy and Bugbear and Housemarque – who were the beginning of the Finnish game industry – did a great job of that. But this is like the question: 'Why are the Finns good in rally?' Nobody knows! But we just are – and we are determined to be good in games, too. So that's the simple answer!

So how does Finland, and the Finnish government, support the game industry?

TV As the industry started to rise, partly also because the country's small and technology-oriented, government instances like Tekes began supporting growing industries that show big international potential. And what could be more prefect than the game industry? In that sense, there is support provided in a good way from the government side.

KH: Basically, [Neogames] are representing the industry in a way that our main goal is to enhance the environment for Finnish game companies to operate. And we have been cooperating a great deal with Tekes trying to figure out what would be the best ways to support the industry as well as trying to gather information about it. So basically we are operating in close cooperation, chasing facts and trying to figure out what's going on.

Petri Järvilehto They're like the social network for game companies!

KH But Tekes is the one with the money, which is very important!

TH We want to promote high-risk projects with international focus, and that goes well with the game industry. Our goals, and the game industry's, are the same.

IK Giving this grandstand and cheap loans allows us to develop our technology infrastructure much further than we would have been able to without those subsidies. So I think that has enhanced many of the companies' positions – we have more robust engines and technology infrastructures than we would have had otherwise. We were even smaller than we are today, so it has helped a lot.

> "It's very true that success creates success. When you have one success story, it's easier for other companies to trust that they are also able to do it"

MM A lot of our partners are listed companies, and they'd often want to see the infamous vertical slice: "We'd like to see final gameplay 24 months before you're actually building it!" But with parties like Tekes, you can build your fundamental tech pipelines, and other things that really escalate your development cycles. And this can also leverage you on to different platforms, different business models and stuff like that.

TH Tekes works with most of the game companies in Finland, from startups to established companies. There's still potential to grow investment in the industry, and overall Tekes is investing almost 600 million euros a year in Finnish tech industries.

What about inter-company relationships?

TV There are now 60 to 70 game companies in Finland, and our industry is moving to a new phase. It's changing fast on a global scale, markets are growing all the time, but one thing that's definitely been helping is that information sharing between studios has still been quite open and supportive. Of course, not the confidential side of the business, but generic learning and developments are all discussed openly.

JM Relationships are really friendly and you always get help, which is nice.
PJ Not only in terms of company management but also employees. Finland has one of the most, if not the most, active IGDA [International Game Developers Association] meetings. We have monthly game developer meetings that pretty often draw – out of the workforce of 1,200 – two or three hundred people to those meetings. Nowadays it's pretty well organised, and usually one of the companies is presenting there. Every now and then companies are presenting their latest news and products, then we all have a beer – which is also subsidised by the chapter! [Laughter.] It's also a great way for foreign employees to meet a vast number of people working in the industry and they can very quickly find and make new connections. It's very cool.
IK CEOs are pretty worried about the decline in productivity the next morning, though! [Laughter.]

There aren't many development communities that would see the lack of a domestic market as an advantage…
MM Out of a population of 5.2 million, even if you have a brilliant attach rate to a console like the 360, it's still going to be about one per cent of your worldwide sales if you're doing your job right. At least, for Remedy, we've tracked that one per cent of units sold will be in Finland.
KH It's about the same for everybody – I've been doing a study, and 98 per cent of Finnish game industry products go to foreign markets.
PJ But if you look at a market like Germany, you have a lot of successful developers there who are creating games for the German market and only for that market. You can easily sell 500,000 units in the German market alone if you have a good title there. Whereas over here, the country's so small that even if you have a hit title, you're looking at, in a very rare case, something like 50,000 sales. So it's pretty obvious that bigger development just won't be able to sustain itself within that market. So you need to start heading outward instantly, and that's a good thing!
TV In general, we have been very closely aligned for decades, at least in terms of entertainment tastes, with the English-speaking western world. Because the market is so small, TV hasn't been dubbed, and so we have been listening to English from childhood and our music tastes are very similar. Gaming tastes are bringing this certain Finnish flavour into the global game market almost immediately. In a way, it's the only option. As Matias said, that's actually been our strength.
IK Our customers are far away, though – that's the other side of this equation. It's taken a while to get into those markets and know the people. I think that was the reason that not that many new game companies came to the console side of things. It's a closed industry where you have established relationships. Companies like Sony are contracting UK-based developers, and have been working with them for a decade or even longer, so it's harder to get those relationships. So most of the new success stories are based in new business areas, starting with pioneering MMOG company Sulake or Rovio now and plenty of other mobile companies.
JM It would have been nice to see *Alan Wake* localised in Finnish! [Laughter.]
PJ One of the things worth highlighting is that traditionally games are not usually localised for the local market at all. So all of us have grown up playing games in English. Games are probably one of the key ways of learning English in general, and that makes it easier when you're starting as a game developer and thinking about what kind of game you'd make; you automatically go: 'It'll be in English' – that's how games work. As the laughter just demonstrated, even the idea of doing localisation feels really funny to us!
JM I was serious! I want it, and I'll pay for it. [Laughter.]
PJ I think we should also point out that there are actually domestic market games over here as well, and some companies that are doing pretty good, but the business is a little different.
KH They are on the online side, and there aren't many of them. I would say the more common way for a Finnish game company to operate in the domestic market is to be a subcontractor to a bigger Finnish studio.

What does Finland have to offer those who work here?
MM I think we've always been able to attract foreign talent. It's a nice quality of life, it's a great place to live. And a lot of the things that we take for granted are not so in various parts of the world, such as free healthcare, free education up to university level, etc. That's also one of the reasons that we have a really skilled workforce, because it is highly educated domestically. Certainly the bulk of our staff is Finnish, but we've also always had international additions to our team, and always worked in English as well. For us, it's been a logical continuation of that to have different nationalities on board. *Alan Wake* had 12 different nationalities on site in our offices.

"A certain type of craziness and foolishness has always been here. There is a mentality of trying to come up with something that hasn't been done before"



TV Now that we have started to grow, we're of course looking for talented people from Finland, but also international talent. At the moment, we have a few different nationalities at RedLynx. They cope very well with the English, the city's so safe you don't have to fear any places where you go, and public transportation works in a completely different way.
Mikael Haveri It actually works!
TV Maybe it's also the exotic flavour: four completely different types of seasons, with very cold winters and ice swimming, then the summers which are very warm and you don't see the night time at all! And something in this seems to draw a certain type of talented employee.
JM One of the important things is that trips to work are fast. Our offices are in Espoo and I live in

Helsinki but it's just 16 minutes, which is nice. It would be completely different in, I don't know, London, for example… [Laughter.]

Good education doesn't necessarily generate creativity – where does Finland's audacity come from?

TM Finnish people are creative and crazy!

PJ Results-wise, Finland has consistently ranked in the top three worldwide for the past decade. I think that contributes a lot to the overall climate – the education is good, but the school system doesn't kill creativity at a young age, which is something that I think happens in a lot of cases. It can churn the whole education thing into a grind.

MM If we're throwing statistics out there, one interesting thing is in terms of quality of life; I think Helsinki ranked in the top three again, which is indicative of what we have here. Just looking back on my days in London, and reflecting on Helsinki, it's not extravagant to have a boat half a mile away from your urban flat, and to have woods virtually a mile away where you can see bunnies and foxes and god knows what else.

JM You've never been there, have you?

MM I go jogging – I just go fast. I scream like a girl and then go. [Laughter.]

And yet you put out *Alan Wake*?

[Laughter.]

MM I'm working through some issues here, right?

TV There's never one reason for creativity, but there are definitely some ingredients. And I think overall, the Finnish mentality and atmosphere has been one that accepts different types of people. And the country has always appreciated technology, even technologies that are just about to be born that no one yet knows how they can be used. So a certain type of craziness and foolishness has always been here. There is a mentality in many people of trying to come up with something that no one has ever done before. And somehow that is supported even though it won't always lead to anything beneficial.

That's one thing we've noticed here: the highly democratic nature of the studios.

IK We have this meritocratic society where we can appreciate talent in our companies. I think the companies listen to their own talent, and we know who knows the things best. We don't kill any creativity within the companies.

MH No one turns down ideas, even though they might come from the janitor. We're very horizontal in terms of the culture in Finland. On top of that, I think the long winters and a lot of time on our hands, along with the broadband available, leads to innovators. Plus, there's the alcohol…



TV Skilled people expect that; they are most motivated when they have responsibility, when they have a say in their projects. And if you allow that, there are definitely going to be some smart people with smart ideas.

MM If we went head-to-head with some of the larger titles out there, and tried to emulate what they're doing at larger studios, I don't think we would be as successful. I think we've always done pretty well at differentiating and creating something unique. If you look at the companies around this table and the types of games that we create, I think on the whole a lot of the success stories and the things that have done well for us have been innovative in some way. We're not coming up against Pepsi or Coke with Helsinki Cola, because that would just be a recipe for disaster. I don't think there's too many of us trying to create the next WWII FPS [laughter] to go against the Activisions or the EAs of the world. Whereas you have crazy people flinging birds at pigs, and that seems to work well.

KH I would say that one of the factors is pragmatic thinking. It's the same thing as the lack of a domestic market; we don't have any domestic markets so we have to go abroad. We don't have many people so we don't have companies with a lot of employees and resources. As a result, we have to be very flat, very efficient. It's a pragmatic way of thinking – not about how it's done, but when it's done the best possible way. That's the Finnish way of thinking in many cases.

TV Another thing is the Finnish way of communicating. It has always been said that it is almost so honest that people might think it's stupid. When the team's working away and everyone can participate, there isn't too much diplomacy and going around the subject – people are direct and to the point.

MM On the other hand, because it's a small sandbox in which we play, your reputation is very important and people get to know you and how you act. A handshake really does work in this city. We can work together on stuff based on a handshake and we'll do the contracts later. That's not a universal thing that you do elsewhere.

Do studios get involved with the education of the next generation of developers in Finland?

TV Universities are just starting to activate in terms of games. The game industry is still small, and institutions develop their courses in a longer-term way. It's taking them time to realise the opportunities in gaming. Fortunately, we can utilise the IT-based skills that are coming from universities.

JM I think we've been really successful taking the generalist you get from university and making them our specialists within a couple of months. That speaks a lot about the level of graduates we get.

IK We're still lacking a game-specific education.

PJ It's starting…

IK Yeah, at the higher level we've got the first polytechnic course going on where they're educating programmers. They haven't got anyone from there to the job markets yet, but it's coming together slowly but steadily. It's a good start.

TV We expect a lot, of course, and we have big plans, but I think for a country of this size, even having five big institutions starting to educate people for the game industry is good.

KH We've been cooperating with all of those facilities for the last four or five years, and have been encouraging them to go further with game education. And in some cases, we've helped in creating that education. If we want to develop, we need to have the right people doing the right jobs. It's true that talented programmers can quite easily go to the game companies and adapt, but in terms of industry development, we definitely need more game-orientated education, and we're working towards that.



Where else do you tend to hire from?

MM Some of the best tools programmers are guys from the telecoms industry who program cell phone networks – because they need to work, right? And reliability in tools is really nice. I think secondly, for us, we're seeing guys with backgrounds in landscape architecture working on our games because the sense of space and proportion is really important. A lot of those skillsets are transferable. I think good designers in many ways might come from a very different background than maybe classical game design.

TV User-generated content is playing a bigger and bigger role in our games, and there are many people in Finland who are using the tools we provide. We have quite a few people who just one year ago were gamers, and now they are doing level design and designing content for our games. And that's been interesting and quite powerful, because we launch our game and in six months' time we start finding amazing tracks and ideas. We contact those gamers, and some of those are interested to work for us – some not. It's not just the industries mixing, but also the industry boundaries somehow completely forming in a new way.

Does your internationalism give you an advantage when it comes to adapting to other markets?

MH We have the English factor, but we're not English. We have the European factor, but we don't really consider ourselves European. And we're Nordic, so we see some similarities between us and the Japanese. So there's similarities with a lot of cultures, but we're kind of the oddballs in the market.

MM That's interesting that you should mention the similarities with the Japanese. I've done a couple of trips there now after launching *Wake*, and I was looking for similarities. The one thing that does strike me is the minimalistic design. Most of our games are kind of pure in many ways – look at *Trials* or *Angry Birds* or even *Wake* in its own category. They're very simple and they try to focus on the essence of the game. I think that's a design thing that we do share. If you look at most offices over here, they're actually quite clean cut and functional, too. I'm not saying we're doing the Ikea of games over here, but there is a certain functionality. A mindset.

TV I think that's an interesting question: are we masters adapting to different markets? I would say that business-wise there is much to learn and to optimise, but I think the main reason for our success has been that we have grown in a western entertainment culture. But on top of that, as Matias said, the game just *has* to be good. And, as we were discussing earlier, the people and companies here, in that sense, are very honest and pure – they simply try to do the best possible game, the best possible product that they can. No matter how the world changes, there is always demand for that.

KH Finland is such a small country that there is no reason for us to create crappy games. If you want to make games, they should be good! [Laughter.]

MM What does work for most of us is that we try not to over-promise, but we try to over-deliver. And that usually ends up with people wanting to work with you in the future. Everybody respects people who are very good at what they do, and there's the strength of the companies and the teams, but I think fundamentally, delivering what you say you're going to do is a core value for everybody in this room. Once again, your reputation is your brand. Whether it's a promise to the end consumer that if there's a Remedy brand on a game it stands for something, and that's a promise that we want to live up to, or whether it's your personal name that you sign up to do something, and you go through thick and thin to deliver what you said you were going to do. Sometimes negotiating with a Finn can be kind of boring, because he tells you what he'll do it for, and then nine months later he'll tell you the same thing! [Laughter.]

"Most of our games are kind of pure in many ways. They're very simple and try to focus on the essence of the game. I think that's a design thing that we share"

Most of the studios here have very small teams, and yet most are working on multiple projects. Why do you think that culture of productivity exists?

PJ Productivity in Finland is very high. There's multiple reasons behind that, of course, but part of it is what Matias mentioned about promises – people will go beyond the call of duty to meet those obligations. But then there's also other reasons like the fact that we usually have relatively regular work hours – we actually have long vacation times compared to the rest of the world, and very long parental leave, for men and women. All of this creates a mentality that when you're working on something, you don't have to try to do your personal stuff. When you get to work, you're 110 per cent there, you get your stuff done and then you check out and it's your own time. That contributes pretty well to the productivity, that people when they're working they are really dedicated. We don't have a culture where people would be required to spend 16 hours a day at the office with no vacations. We ask everyone to give their best effort at work and then it's OK to take off.

TV At the moment it might seem like there are many teams coming from Finland, but in reality many of these companies have been honing their skills for a long time – five, ten years – and it's not just game development expertise that has been developed, but also the management of processes. Not just developing games, but managing the game business.

MM These changes take ten years, but the question is when did it start? I think it started about nine years ago! So it looks like a lot of things are happening at once. On our radar we know a few companies that are not at this table, but are certainly very promising. And maybe of those half a dozen companies that are really promising, three will be really, really successful.

IK And maybe we don't have the baggage of doing this work-for-hire console stuff. Nobody has asked any of us to do *Pirates Of The Caribbean* [laughter], we've always had our own little things we want to work on. Very few people have gone after contract work that in the UK and the States has been the case. Or super-big triple-A. Like in Sweden, the majority of the business used to be three, four companies: Starbreeze, Avalanche, DICE, etc. The structure of the business is different – you have studios made up of several hundred people, working on two or three different things which need 100 people per project. We've always had a smaller mindset; the biggest projects have been 50 people or so. ■




ALAN WAKE

RedLynx

Making addictive games isn't a trial for this Helsinki developer

RedLynx

Founded 2000
Location Helsinki
Employees 45
URL www.redlynx.com
Selected softography *Trials HD, Trials 2 SE, DrawRace, Monster Trucks Nitro, Reset Generation, Pathway to Glory*
Current projects *MotoHeroz* (WiiWare), *1000 Heroz* (iOS), *DrawRace 2* (iOS), plus three unannounced games



As we step into RedLynx's top-floor offices, decked out in red-tinted '70s wood panelling throughout, we're greeted by a Parrot AR Drone. It hovers in front of us for a second, an unblinking eye scanning the scene, before flying back out of the room and down the corridor. For a moment, we wonder if we're in some low-budget remake of Batteries Not Included, but much to our relief, creative director Antti Ilvessuo steps around the corner wearing a mischievous smile. The welcome is indicative of Redlynx's commitment to pure and simple fun.



IOS game *DrawRace* allows the player's finger to set the speed and racing line in singleplayer and multiplayer races

The studio is best known for its raucous XBLA hit *Trials HD*, but RedLynx has created over 100 titles, cutting its teeth on mobile releases and sub-contracting deals with other developers. The turning point came in 2008, when the company decided to focus on self-publishing its own original IP after facing resistance from publishers unconvinced of the potential inherent in RedLynx's stripped-down, finely tuned concepts. The move was made possible thanks to the increasing viability of digital distribution, Steam proving the perfect platform on which to launch *Trials 2 SE*, a full-blown release based on earlier web games.

Redlynx's self-belief was rewarded with huge success, the game quickly shifting around 200,000 copies and paving the way for *Trials HD*. And that self-belief still drives the company, the sense of pride in their work palpable as we're introduced to various staffers. More than one RedLynx employee asserts that the company is comprised of gamers making games for gamers, and, as the team insists that we stay to play *MotoHeroz* and *Trials HD* with them even after a full day hosting our visit, it's clear that it isn't some kind of empty corporate slogan.







***MotoHeroz* and *Trials HD* are both physics-based games that pit the player against the environment. *MotoHeroz* adds multiplayer, however**





STUDIO INSIGHT
Tero Virtala
CEO

Has the success of *Trials HD* changed the way the company operates?
I wouldn't say that. Of course, this year is a big year, because we have six games coming out. We haven't had this big a number in the previous years – it would be maybe one bigger game and two smaller games. Also, all the success and positive feedback we've gotten from *Trials HD* has translated to positive support for our other games – it's a game from the developers of *Trials HD*; everyone recognises that.

Six games at once across multiple platforms is quite a lot for any studio, let alone one consisting of only 45 people.
We want to be at the cutting edge, and I would say ten years ago, for a company so small, it would have been very difficult to make a cutting-edge game, because you would have had to make a big console game. Now, the market is changing. We have the digital distribution space opening up and it's possible to really make something that opens the market up with just ten to 20 people. Also, we have never wanted to focus on one single thing. I think each project has been an important source of innovation and learning, and it's also a way of managing risks. If you consider that, had we focused years ago on the most successful area we had – turn-based strategy games – I doubt that we would be this successful now. Trends and consumer preferences change and I just don't think that turn-based strategy games are the big thing nowadays. And everyone knows how fast the markets change, so going multiplatform is also, business-wise, a wise decision. If someone tried to pick a platform to stick with for the next few years, I think it's likely they would choose wrong. There are going to be some changes that no one expects.

Have you faced any challenges moving to self-publishing?
I think in future, the industry is going to be much more networked. There are going to be new types of players, like us, that own their properties and focus on the development side but are also able to partner with those bigger publishers. We are already seeing that happening a lot. Microsoft is very open to smaller developers, EA has its programs with partners, and the iPhone brought a completely new type of publisher model to the market. So I don't think the future will be as black-and-white as it used to be, with only developers and publishers. I think there is going to be much more variety in time. In the end, our business is about games: we just want to develop great games. When those are in order, everything else is just much easier.



What do you think has been key to the success of your releases?
We've made a lot of games – many of those were in the earlier years for mobile devices – and I think all of them are still really important, because every single game has taught us something different. Focus on simple board-game mechanics, games with multiplayer which have maybe a bit more functionality, some games which are very good, and some games that we thought early on had features which worked well – they've taught us to develop further. I think now when our games come out they are always very fun games, quite focused games with two or so core features and built around that. I think perhaps the reason why they are, gameplay-wise, so fun is the experience of this wide variety of previous projects. ■



TOP RedLynx's innovations extend to saving a small fortune on wallpaper. **ABOVE** The rider from *Trials HD* greets visitors

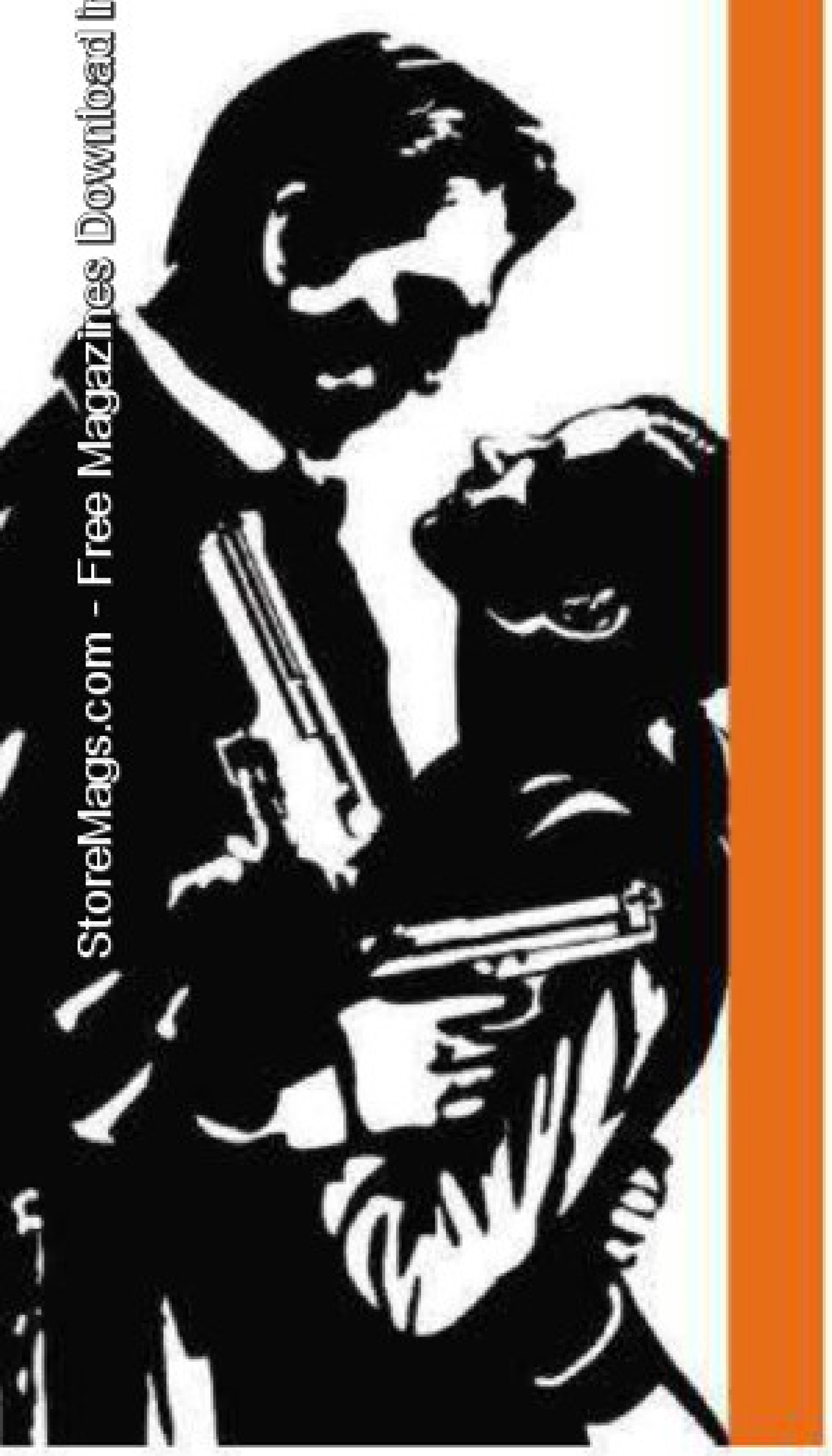

SUMMER 2011
MOTO
HEROZ
"It has the same focus, charm and addictive nature that so many Nintendo games have."
Richard George, IGN.com
RedLynx

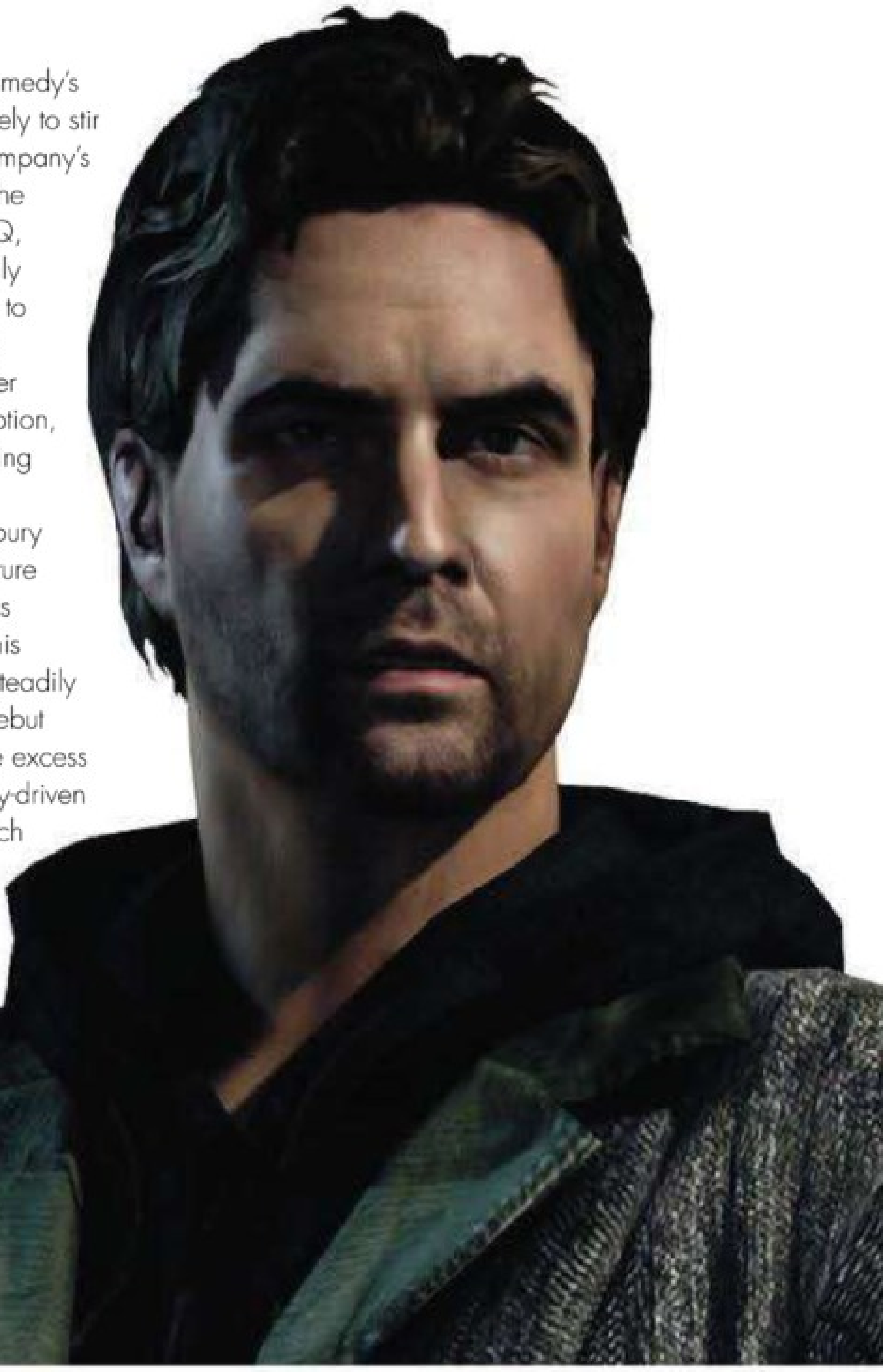

3
www.pegi.info
WiiWare

Remedy Entertainment

A developer with the ambition and drive to consistently break new ground

Founded 1995
Location Espoo
Employees 50
Key staff Matias Myllyrinne (CEO), Markus Mäki (CTO), Mika Reini (CFO), Sam Lake (creative director), Sami Vanhatalo, (lead technical artist)
URL www.remedygames.com
Selected softography
Death Rally, Max Payne, Max Payne 2: The Fall Of Max Payne, Alan Wake
Current project
Building technology for an unannounced game





While its presence on the ground floor of Remedy's light and airy Espoo headquarters is unlikely to stir many Finns, we have to admit that the company's large, fully equipped sauna catches us on the hop. The Roman Baths may be only a short stroll from **Edge** HQ, but a sauna is a workplace extravagance we can only imagine. But this is Finland, and we soon grow used to their ubiquity. Of even greater surprise, though, is the shelving located just around the corner, straining under the weight of guns, swords and knives. From its inception, Remedy Entertainment's mission was to produce leading action games – it's certainly not lacking in props.

When we're led into the room opposite, the armoury makes sense. Remedy's HQ boasts a test motion-capture room which the developer uses to 'sketch' ideas for its games. Despite the seething promise of violence in this setup, however, Remedy's output over the years has steadily matured in its interpretation of 'action game'. From debut racing shooter title *Death Rally*, through the bullet-time excess of the first two *Max Payne* titles and finally to the story-driven intrigue of *Alan Wake*, the studio has built just as much of a reputation for narrative content as it has for adrenaline-fuelled action.

Remedy's high-profile, big-budget releases belie a modest staff, and the atmosphere is relaxed, but notably charged, as a result. We sit down – not in the steam room, unfortunately with MD **Matias Myllyrinne** and head of franchise development **Oskari Hakkinen** to discuss life in Espoo, iOS development and unwittingly terrifying local bankers.





Remedy is known for its titles *Max Payne 2* (above right) and *Alan Wake* (main). Its first game, *Death Rally* (above left), has been remade for iOS



STUDIO INSIGHT

Matias Myllyrinne
CEO

Oskari Hakkinen
Head of franchise development





Why did you choose to locate Remedy in Espoo rather than Helsinki?

Matias Myllyrinne The company was founded in '95, just four kilometres down the road, in a basement! We kind of moved around, found this office and made it our own kind of Batcave [laughs]. We didn't really want to be in a business park – which we were while working on the *Max Payne* games. I remember back on *Max Payne 2*, we were modelling the commandos and the art director would wear his balaclava, black clothing and boots, and walk around with a Colt Commando in his hand. You'd have bankers coming to the office opposite, and they're kind of going: "Fuck!" [Laughs.] You've seen our weapons – we need our own space! It's good to have a fluid space as well, so we can move people around and people can get together for different projects. The projects require different people to work closely together and some other spaces don't do that very well.

What's life like at Remedy?

MM It's a great quality of life in terms of just having nature around us, and having access to good public transport. Some of our American recruits have left their car at the office and used public transport because the buses go every two minutes! It's a nice location. There are a lot of universities around, as well.

Why did you choose to explore iOS development?

Oskari Hakkinen Over the years we've been getting mails saying, 'We love *Death Rally* – how can we play on a modern PC? It doesn't work any more.' So our CTO was just like: "We're getting all this mail all the time, let's do a fun thing just for the fans out there and make it work on modern-day PCs." And this was 2009, and we put it out just for free. We got a ton of mail again saying: 'Thank you, you've brought this classic back to us, it's as good as it ever was.' It all kind of just snowballed from there; we got into a dialogue with Mountain Sheep, the guys behind [iOS survival shooter] *MiniGore*, and it just turned out to be a natural fit.

How does a smaller project like that square up with the large-scale, narrative-driven projects you're known for?

MM We spent a lot of time on the road last year launching *Wake* – a lot of travel. We were playing a ton of iPhone games – that's the platform of choice when you're at airports. I think it really started to sink in for us what kind of games you can do on the platform and how you can push some things a bit further. And the games were getting increasingly complex – I've completed *Plants Vs Zombies* three times now with my kids on different devices, and for me there's a real depth to the gameplay. It's not just a one-trick pony – there's a lot of thinking behind it, a lot of balancing. So it felt like a good platform to be on. Plus, it was fun!

OH We're making triple-A games here in-house at Remedy, but it would be really interesting if we could use other platforms in the future to add some component to that triple-A title on another platform. *Dead Space* did it right, and a few other big games have been doing it already – it will be interesting to see how far you can actually take that. So I think it's a learning process for us as well, to see what you can do on that platform and how we can utilise it in the future. ■





Remedy HQ is bright, spacious and inviting – a far cry from the dark, claustrophobic environments that characterise some of its games

Housemarque

From its roots in the Amiga demoscene, this developer is focused on the future

Founded 1995
Location Helsinki
Employees 30
Key staff Harri Tikkanen (co-founder and creative director), Ilari Kuittinen (co-founder and CEO)
URL www.housemarque.com
Selected softography *Super Stardust HD, Dead Nation, Outland*
Current projects Unannounced iOS game





Super Stardust HD **has had several updates since its 2007 release, such as new modes, an orchestral soundtrack and stereoscopic 3D support**

STUDIO INSIGHT
Ilari Kuittinen
Co-founder and CEO



Housemarque is no stranger to adaptation. Formed from the fusion of two Amiga game developers – Terramarque and Bloodhouse – looking to capitalise on the rise of the PC market in the mid-'90s, the studio subsequently turned its attentions to downloadable titles in 2006 and is responsible for two of PSN's best-selling games. We talk with co-founder and CEO **Ilari Kuittinen** about the challenges of focusing exclusively on the download market.

Do you think digital distribution has allowed a return to the experimental culture of Finland's '90s demoscene?
It just opened up a new opportunity. Obviously, publishers knew that we could produce something – we have console games out, we have PC games, we have a track record, you know? We got talking with Sony and eventually pitched them *Super Stardust*, which they liked, so we started working on it right away.

Super Stardust **is one of the top-selling PSN titles, but do you think PSN is pushed enough?**
I think there's lots of potential there, but it seems that it doesn't attract enough customers, for some reason. Whether that's the layout of the shop, or that people don't know about the services, or whatever. I think there are quite a few great games out there you can buy and enjoy, but I feel that gamers are using the console for certain types of gameplay; they buy the console and they buy *Black Ops* and that's about it. They may download demos, but they don't download these smaller games. They don't hear about them, and I think that's a marketing problem. They are not aware of what's out there.

In what ways do you think the situation could be improved?
We're happy to be able do our games on PSN – we wouldn't have been able do to them otherwise! But even the basics that Amazon is doing, like pushing a recommendation, and having that clever way of setting up the shop – [Sony] should copy it. Hire a few guys, both Xbox guys and PlayStation guys. This isn't rocket science, the models are there. It's been pretty fantastically working for other systems. Still, I think the problem is that it's just a tiny, tiny percentage of their business currently, so it doesn't have their full focus. But I just wonder how on Earth they're going to do the transition if they've got one side of the business worth billions of dollars and [digital] is just a fraction of that. It's going to be very interesting to see how they're going to handle that.

But you're able to continue making games based on the revenue created by sales on PSN?
Yeah, and now we have *Outland*, our 2D action platformer, coming out, which is pretty ambitious. It's our first platformer, and we've done something different with our treatment style. You can try out many things [on PSN], so that's good, but even though *Super Stardust* has been top-selling, and *Dead Nation* has been one of the top-selling games since launch, the rewards could be bigger, put it that way. I think for both XBLA and PSN, the audience isn't that big. We have, I think, 90 million or 100 million consoles out there, and while I think it's great for pushing additional content for triple-A titles, it really hasn't grown that much over the years in terms of the amount of titles people are buying from the store. ■


OUTLAND
DEAD
NATION
SUPER
STARDUST™
HD

Frozenbyte

The Peter Pan of Finland's developers, Frozenbyte refuses to grow up

FROZENBYTE

Founded 2001
Location Helsinki
Employees 35
URL www.frozenbyte.com
Selected softography *Shadowgrounds, Trine, Shadowgrounds Survivor*
Current projects *Jack Claw* (a crowd-sourcing project for PC), *Trine 2* (360, Mac, Linux, PC, PS3), *Splot* (iOS, Mac, Linux, PC)

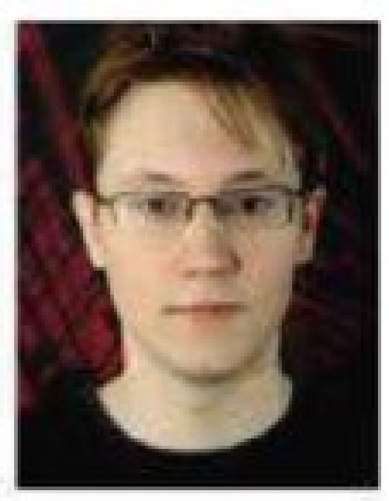




Frozenbyte's *Trine 2* sees players cooperate as wizard, thief and knight to fight enemies and solve puzzles with their complementary abilities

STUDIO INSIGHT
Mikael Haveri
Sales and marketing manager
Joel Kinnunen
Vice president





With an average employee age somewhere on the south side of 30, Frozenbyte is the precocious upstart of the Finnish development scene. It shows, too, with a remarkably democratic structure and its own idiosyncratic way of doing things. But it's a methodology that works, underscored by the huge uptake of the recently released Humble Frozenbyte Bundle. We gather around sandwiches, chocolate bars and beer on ice to discuss the developer's leftfield approach with vice president **Joel Kinnunen** and sales and marketing manager **Mikael Haveri**.

How do you think your youth affects your outlook and achievements?
JK I don't know if it's the age or the process, but we have only three people who had prior industry experience before joining us. Everyone else is fresh from school, or just from their hobby background, so that may have some sort of effect upon the company. It also means that we are not really rigid in our ways; we have very little mid-management, for example.


You've achieved a lot, but it sounds a bit like organised chaos.
MH In many ways it is. That's where you need the organic growth, too, because you can't just add a whole other group from nowhere and expect it to work. Everybody has to get into the structure of the company and understand how we work. The whole horizontal structure works if you have slowly developed around it.

Do you think that gives employees a sense of ownership?
JK It does, and as a company many of our employees are owners with a small stake, so that does play into it as well.

Is that something you offer all of your employees?
JK Yeah, it's going to be. We haven't actually defined any sort of structure to it yet, but it's something we plan to do.

How do other companies deal with you?
JK That's an interesting question, because in the past when we were desperately trying to get publisher attention, I think we tried to behave like everyone would expect, acting really professionally and all that. Nowadays, I think we don't try that hard any more, because we know what we're aiming for. We're in a good position and hopefully we'll be able to self-fund all of our future projects, so it's really a question of who's the best publishing partner in this digital world, who can bring something to the table and not just slap a logo on the box. I don't know if we're starting to get a bit arrogant or something, but it feels like we're now in the driving seat.

***Trine*'s sense of humour works really well, and it feels like it's eminently exportable. Do you think that's a factor in its success? Is Finnish humour universal?**
MH *Trine* is a really good example of how that can work, but then again it's not Finnish, per se. There's Finnish aspects to it: Pontius is my favourite character; he's like your average Finnish man after a beer or two – without that he probably wouldn't say anything throughout the whole game. But the British voice actors are brilliant, so we get input from there, too. ■


TRINE 2
COMING SOON TO
XBLA, PSN, AND PC
WWW.TRINE2.COM
ATLUS
WWW.ATLUS.COM
FROZENBYTE
PS3
XBOX 360
XBOX LIVE
12
www.pegi.info
PROVISIONAL

Futuremark

A leader in the benchmarking field expands into game development

FUTUREMARK CORPORATION

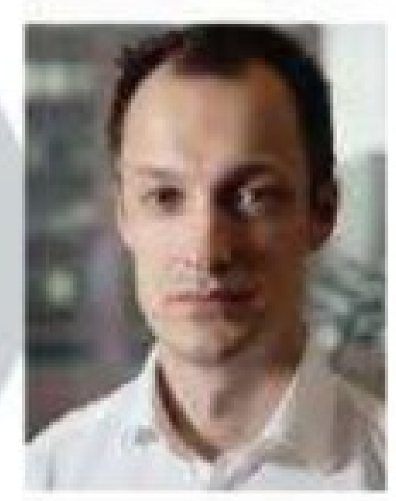
Founded 1997
Location Espoo
Employees 30
Key staff Jukka Mäkinen (CEO), Jaakko Haapasalo (director of Futuremark Games Studio), Joonas Palmgren (lead designer), Jussi Markkanen (lead programmer), Jussi Jokijärvi (lead artist)
URL www.futuremark.com
Selected softography 3DMark, PCMark, *Shattered Horizon*
Current projects Three unannounced games in progress, as well as continued support for 3DMark, PCMark and *Shattered Horizon* (PC)





Shattered Horizon **sees players fight in zero-gravity environments surrounded by the rocky debris resulting from a huge explosion on the Moon**

STUDIO INSIGHT
Jukka Makinen
CEO



Born out of Remedy in 1997 to develop the studio's Final Reality 3D benchmarking tool, Futuremark is now the world leader in PC benchmarking, best known for its 3DMark series of benchmarks. Though the company has only 30 staff, it has found time to create a game-development division and create *Shattered Horizon*, an online multiplayer FPS played in zero gravity. Company CEO **Jukka Makinen** talks us through Futuremark's structure and ambitions for the future.


Is Finland's PC market a healthy one?
I don't know the exact figures for Finland, but I think all game companies here have a global outlook. Especially now with digital distribution, it's easy to reach a worldwide audience, no matter where you are based. The PC demoscene has always been strong in Finland and that culture influences many of the developers here.

Why was the decision made to move into game production rather than staying with benchmarking?
I think the origin is in all the years we spent making different versions of 3DMark. At some point the stars were aligned and we could act on the requests from the benchmark team who had been asking us to create games since the first 3DMark! We set up the studio in January 2008, and... well, it wasn't simple, but we got it done and we are happy with the results so far. We self-published *Shattered Horizon* on PC in 2009 and now have three new projects in development.

With so few staff, how have you handled the development of games as well as benchmarking utilities?
Futuremark has two business units, with a business head for each. One is PC products and services, which is the benchmarks and web production side, and the other is the games studio. The two businesses are separated to an extent, but we encourage sharing across units. Development cycles, whether for games or benchmarks, have their peaks and troughs, so it actually helps us to be able to move people to where they are most needed.

It sounds like a very fluid setup.
Yeah, I think it's good for people to be able to take on new challenges, to learn and develop. Our company is flexible in other aspects as well. We don't have a strict clocking-in time, for example – people have their own lives, kids and so forth, and we try to respect that. Some like to be in early, others need to come in later because of family commitments. If the company needs to bend, then the company bends. In return, people give more, because they know that we actually meet them somewhere in the middle. I think this helps us produce more than would otherwise be possible with the small number of people that we have.

Has *Shattered Horizon* met the expectations you had for it?
Overall, we're happy with the game. It's been profitable and it's helped us mature as a developer. We knew there would be a steep learning curve in making games, we just didn't know that it would be so steep! Working with Steam has been great. Over the past year we've released a number of free updates and have tried to involve our community as much as possible, which for a small studio is important, I think. We just added singleplayer modes with our latest update, for example. ■


Follow the development of our new games at
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Rovio Mobile

This growing company's ambitions don't stop at one monster-sized hit

ROVIO

Founded 2003 as Relude, rebranded in 2005
Location Espoo
Employees 60
Key staff Mikael Hed (CEO), Niklas Hed (COO), Petri Järvilehto (SVP console development)
URL www.rovio.com
Selected softography *Angry Birds, Angry Birds Halloween, Space Impact: Meteor Shield*
Current projects Nine other unannounced games in progress; cross-media expansion of *Angry Birds*





Physics-heavy pig-smashing game *Angry Birds* has sold over 12 million copies through Apple's App Store alone since its launch in December 2009

STUDIO INSIGHT
Niklas Hed
COO and co-founder
Petri Jarvilehto
SVP of console development





Despite having released over 50 mobile titles in the eight years since the company was founded, working with major companies like EA, Nokia and Namco Bandai in the process, most people would struggle to name all but one game in Rovio's back catalogue: *Angry Birds*. Surrounded by plush merchandise, we sit down with COO and co-founder **Niklas Hed**, and SVP of console development **Petri Jarvilehto**, to discuss Finland and the company's avian phenomenon.


What does Espoo offer Rovio?
Petri Jarvilehto The Helsinki area in general is an awesome place for mobile development because there's so much stuff around the environment. Nokia has been driving mobile development, so there's a vast amount of mobile developers hiding highly educated talent that's available. So it's a good place to be. We're able to attract a lot of talent here.
Niklas Hed And with Nokia close by, we can get their wisdom in five minutes. Then Helsinki and a host of technology centres, like Helsinki University of Technology, are 500 metres away.

Do you look to hire locally?
NH Well, we are only hiring locally. We have people from abroad, but they are from other companies. We are starting to activate on the university side as well, so we've started this Rovio Academy where we take eight programmers and train them to become game programmers. They have to have a background in programming and proper education as well.
PJ I think we went through like 500 applications and eight were selected. It's an interesting programme.

Rovio was born at university – are you hoping to allow other people coming up to do the same that you've done?
NH Yeah, I think partly we have selfish reasons behind it, because we need more people to join the industry. If we want to acquire new people, it means either going abroad or take people from the existing pool, which means we need to basically knock on the competitors' doors and steal the people from there.
PJ And since everybody knows everybody, it's not likely that you can go down that road, or would even want to.

You've had a very rapid growth – from university to £42 million in venture capital in a very short space of time. How have you coped with that?
NH We've seen the ups and downs, so we know how fragile the business is. I don't believe that we will drop, but that possibility is in the background and keeping us down to Earth. And now we have the possibility to grow a lot, and we need to calibrate all the time where we are – one year ago, we were doing only a few millions of revenue; now it's ten times that. But it's all about just calibrating.

***Angry Birds* players might not be aware of your other games. Is that frustrating?**
NH If you look at the download figures, I mean, I'm not disappointed. Just the opposite! We had a strategy where we wanted to try and make ten smaller titles, and that one of those would become a hit. What we didn't realise was that it was going to be the first one!
PJ It's one of those overnight success stories that took ten years to make! ■


ANGRY BIRDS
EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED
ANGRYBIRDS.COM
ROVIO



GET INTO GAMES

ADVICE ON STARTING A CAREER IN GAME DEVELOPMENT FROM INSIDE THE INDUSTRY

Games have never been so easy to get into, the forces of digital distribution, wide smartphone use, powerful free development tools and the ever-broadening market appeal of gaming combining to seed the most diverse landscape of interactive entertainment we have ever seen.

With a wealth of experienced individuals keen to pass on their knowledge, it would be churlish not to capitalise on the opportunity, so as well as profiling top university courses, we also find out how the National Film and Television School (1) intends to bring its reputation for excellence to game education.

There's plenty to be said for a good education, as the two teams behind DigiPen projects *Narbacular Drop* and *Tag: The Power Of Paint* will attest (2). Two members, Jeep Barnett and Teejeev Kohli, offer advice on how to get your work noticed.

Of course, all the bandwidth and credit-card processing in the world won't help you if you don't have a game to ship, so we speak to Unity3D CEO David Helgason about what Unity, one of several freely available and powerful development tools, can do for those keen to get a foothold in the industry (3). And talking of students, we also chat with the team behind the award-winning Unity-powered physics platformer, *Glid*.

Digital distribution has given countless developers a direct route to market, and this year, we speak to four developers who have all made a living from creating iOS games (4) (5).

None of this is to say that the industry's major players aren't forging new standards in graphical fidelity or redefining our expectations of what a game can achieve – they are. But now their efforts are bolstered by a huge supporting cast of passionate programmers, artists and risk-takers keen to explore every avenue of game development open to them, and within these pages we look at three options of professional study dedicated to get hopefuls started (6) (7) (8). The evolution of game education is obviously great news for hopeful students and graduates, but ultimately gamers will benefit, too. ■

1



2


3


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5


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8

EDUCATING BETA

We look at how the National Film and Television School hopes to redesign the game designer



JON WEINBREN
Head of games design and development, NFTS
www.nfts.co.uk

A lot of (arguably wasted) time has been dedicated to the comparison of games with what were, until very recently, significantly more successful media. Art, literature, films and television – it is, perhaps, an inevitability that, as it struggles to find an identity of its own, apologists for any new form of expression or entertainment will seek to legitimise it within the precedents set out by existing channels. But even as today's game industry continues to endear itself to broader markets on its own terms, there is still value in recognition from other, more established sectors.

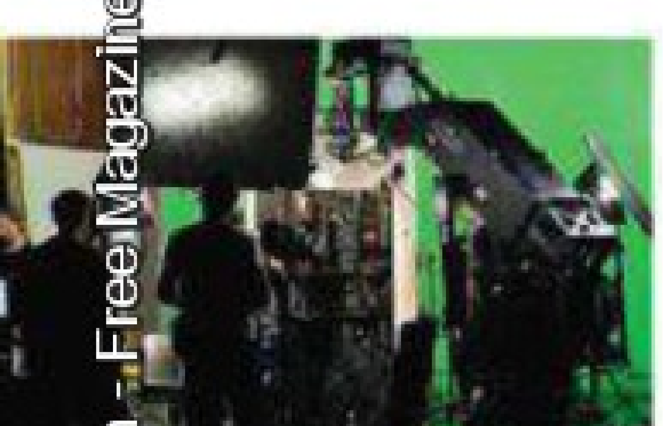
And so it is that the National Film and Television School (NFTS) is planning to offer a postgraduate course in game design starting in January, promising to use its media experience for the good of the burgeoning game industry. According to its Web site, the NFTS is "the UK's national centre of excellence for postgraduate education". The school's current range of two-year film and television MA courses – all of which are validated by the Royal College of Art – aim to equip graduates to enter the industry at a higher level than a more generalist filmmaking MA. Sounds like a familiar gap in the market, right?

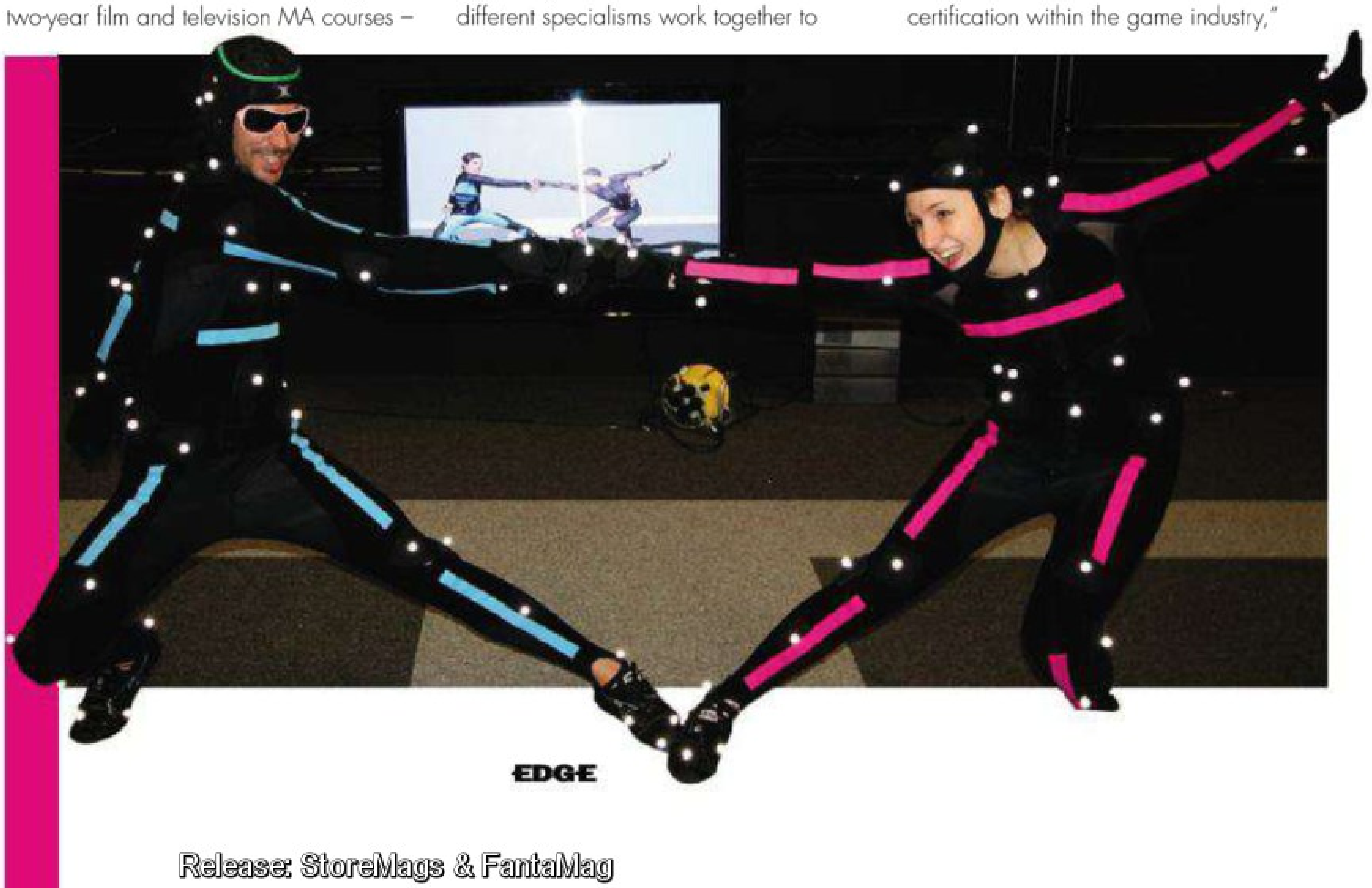
"There have been a lot of game courses at undergraduate level, but not so many at postgraduate level," observes NFTS head of games design and development **Jon Weinbren**, who has nearly 20 years of experience across videogames, interactive media, film and broadcast television. "A lot of our graduates were expressing more interest in, and actually ended up working in, the game industry. And a lot of developers express an interest in working with people who come from film and TV backgrounds, particularly in the area of design.

"So with the growth of content development on a more sophisticated level, it seems that we have a lot of technical expertise here in terms of working at the cutting edge of the media industry in general. Also in terms of our storytelling and collaborative culture where different specialisms work together to create a final major project – which is pretty unique to the NFTS. We've been talking to developers and publishers and there is a thirst for something which is at the same sort of level as the film and television courses here."

More recently, the NFTS has expanded into offering a course in digital, special and visual effects, as well as digital post-production, and it was this that provided the bridge needed to move into full game design and development education. And with the increasing convergence of the TV, film and game industries – something that is likely to become far more pronounced over the next few years – the NFTS is in a unique position to submerge its students in the cultures of all three industries simultaneously. By producing graduates with such a holistic perspective on entertainment media, the NFTS's endeavours threaten to enrich each industry, establishing long-lasting ties between the professionals of the future.

"One of the key issues for me is trying to raise the bar in terms of content certification within the game industry,"





The National Film and Television School boasts a wide range of leading technology, such as a dedicated motion-capture suite



Weinbren explains. "It's an incredibly economically successful area, and it's beginning to get quite a bit of cultural status, but it still harks back to its niche origins. More than that, it seems to be expanding into different niches – for example, family and casual games. And the efforts of some people to create almost cinematic experiences within games are usually valiant, but they could do with a bit more input from an element of culture that's been successfully going for over 100 years.

"It's interesting that in the game industry the word 'development' means 'production', but in the film industry 'development' means 'pre-production' – it's a real culture difference. Games tend to be made by example, so you want to get something to show very quickly – rapid prototyping is the order of the day, especially recently. Whereas, in film particularly, it's much more about getting the concept, story and script before you turn the camera on."

"Games tend to be made by example, so you want to get something to show very quickly – rapid prototyping is the order of the day"

Weinbren is hoping the course – which, like the school's film and television equivalents, will have space for around eight students each year – will appeal to a wide range of individuals and reach well beyond what might be considered the traditional audience for game education.

"There'll be people from [current undergraduate courses] there who are interested, of course, but more to the point I would love to reach the English graduates from Cambridge or the physics graduates from Bristol, or the refugees from the film and TV industry who see games as a blank canvas and have always experimented with technology, a bit of coding and scripting."

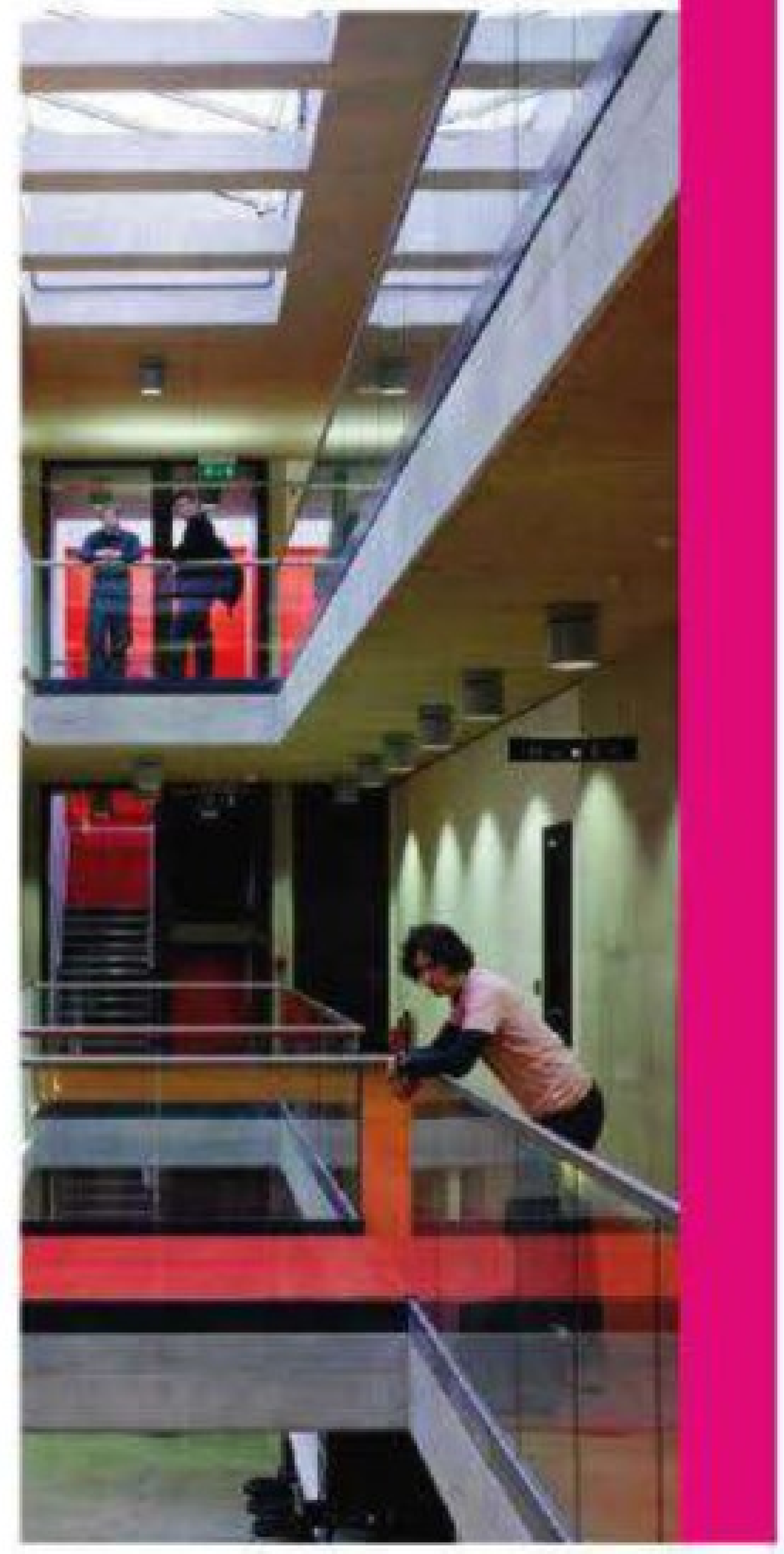
Fees for the course are currently listed at £9,800 (£20,500 overseas), which Weinbren feels is a competitive price point for a postgraduate course today. The school is keen to prevent fees from becoming a stumbling block, however, and offers more bursaries and scholarships relative to the size of its student body than any other top educational institution, according to its Web site. Even so, with cost of getting on to the course and the small annual intake, there is a danger that it could be perceived as elitist. Weinbren hopes this won't be the case.

"I'm a little against the idea of auteurs, because although the film industry tends to rather like them, what we're trying to do is create collaborations through the way the course is structured," he explains. "There'll be a grounding in all disciplines initially, then very soon people will specialise in either design, art, animation or producing. So we're looking for people who collaborate effectively.

"I think with interactive experiences, with games, a more post-modern approach – the ideas of Barthes and Derrida, where the author is dead and everything is within the media artefact and its relationship to the audience – is a much more interesting model, because you're orchestrating audience experience. It's kind of the postmodern ideal come true, in a way..."

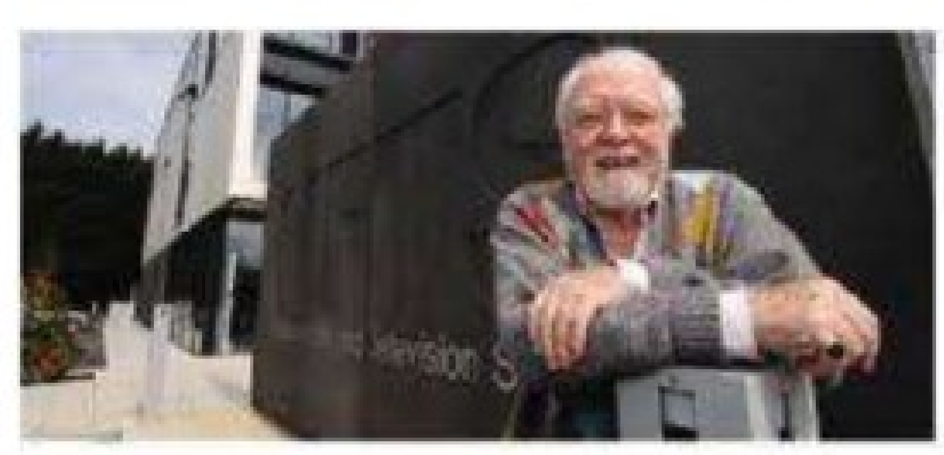
Weinbren pauses for a while before apologetically adding, "Is that too highfalutin?" Well, we don't think so, but surely that's best left to the audience to decide. ■





The school's striking building is complemented by facilities including professional-standard film and TV studios, a screening room and post-production





NFTS's Games Design and Development course will offer extended sessions with key figures from the game and film industries. Weinbren is currently in talks with a number of studios – including Blitz, Supermassive and Lionhead – and so can't confirm who will be involved, but he stresses that rather than the more typical visiting lecturer students might expect, guests will offer a deeper level of critical engagement. In addition, film industry veterans such as cinematographer Brian Tufano and actor Andy Serkis, visiting the school's film and television MA students, will be on hand to offer their expertise, too.

WORK AND PLAY

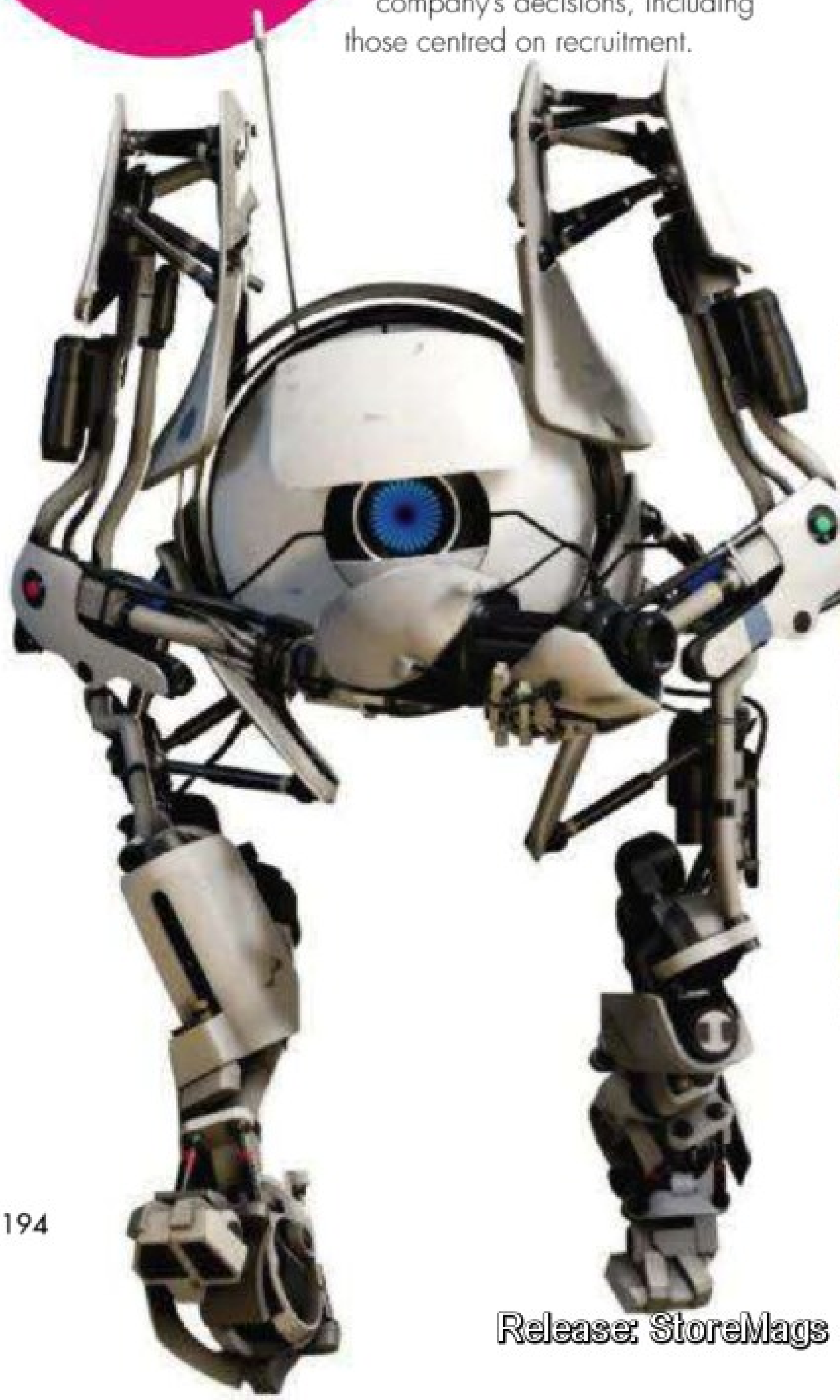
Valve tells us how playing other people's games enough might just get you a job making its next one





TEJEEV KOHLI
Level designer
JEEP BARNETT
Programmer

With the increasing prominence of game industry 'personalities' – more often than not serving as the mouthpiece for larger studios' projects – it's difficult to shake the picture of the auteur issuing orders down a chain of command, creativity restricted very much to the top tier. Of course, many developers' experience of working on a big-budget, potentially massmarket, title will be one of focused specialism, and necessarily so. But Valve has built an enviable reputation for thinking outside of the box – orange or otherwise – when it comes to game development, and this ethos permeates every single one of the company's decisions, including those centred on recruitment.

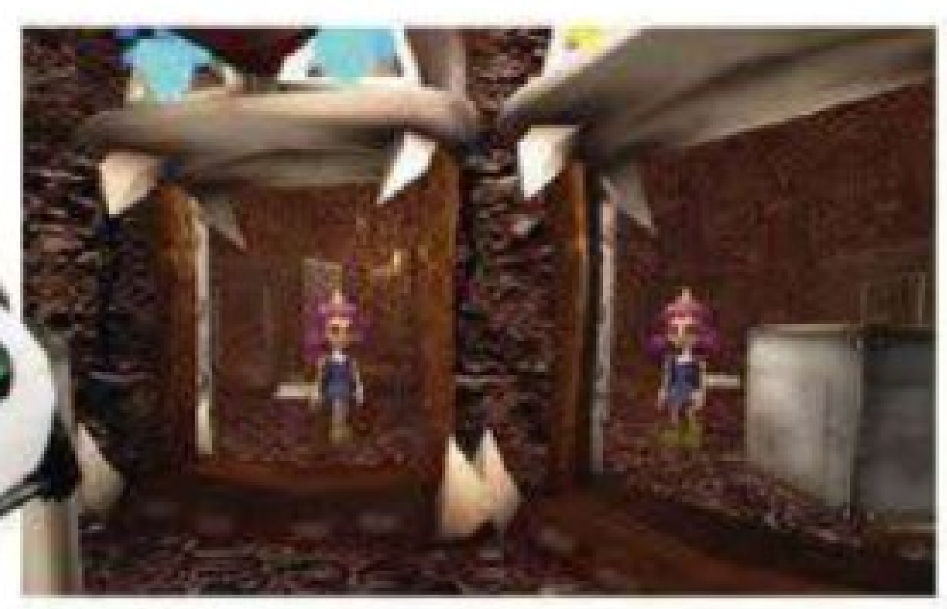


By now it's well known that in 2005 Valve hired the entire team behind *Narbacular Drop*, a project created by senior students at the Washington-based DigiPen Institute of Technology. The ideas that formed the core of that 15-minute game eventually became the much-lauded *Portal*. Far from finding the move from education to working for a large company restrictive, however, the team discovered a surprisingly relaxed approach at Valve.

"I can remember a few things that we were told not to do at DigiPen. We did them anyway, but those conversations never happened at Valve," explains programmer and DigiPen graduate **Jeep Barnett**, who recently masterminded The Potato Sack ARG for *Portal 2*'s release. "They really left us alone to do things the way we wanted.

"Most of our team had already found jobs at GDC and were starting to part ways when Valve invited us to come back together for *Portal*. It was pretty sudden for Dave [Kircher, now a Valve software engineer] and me since we were nearing completion of our first title at Sandlot Games. We actually worked both jobs for an overlap of three months!"

> "Play the games that you like and identify things that could be improved upon, things that could be expanded upon"





Narbacular Drop (top) and Tag: The Power Of Paint (above) were both created during the students' time with the DigiPen Institute of Technology

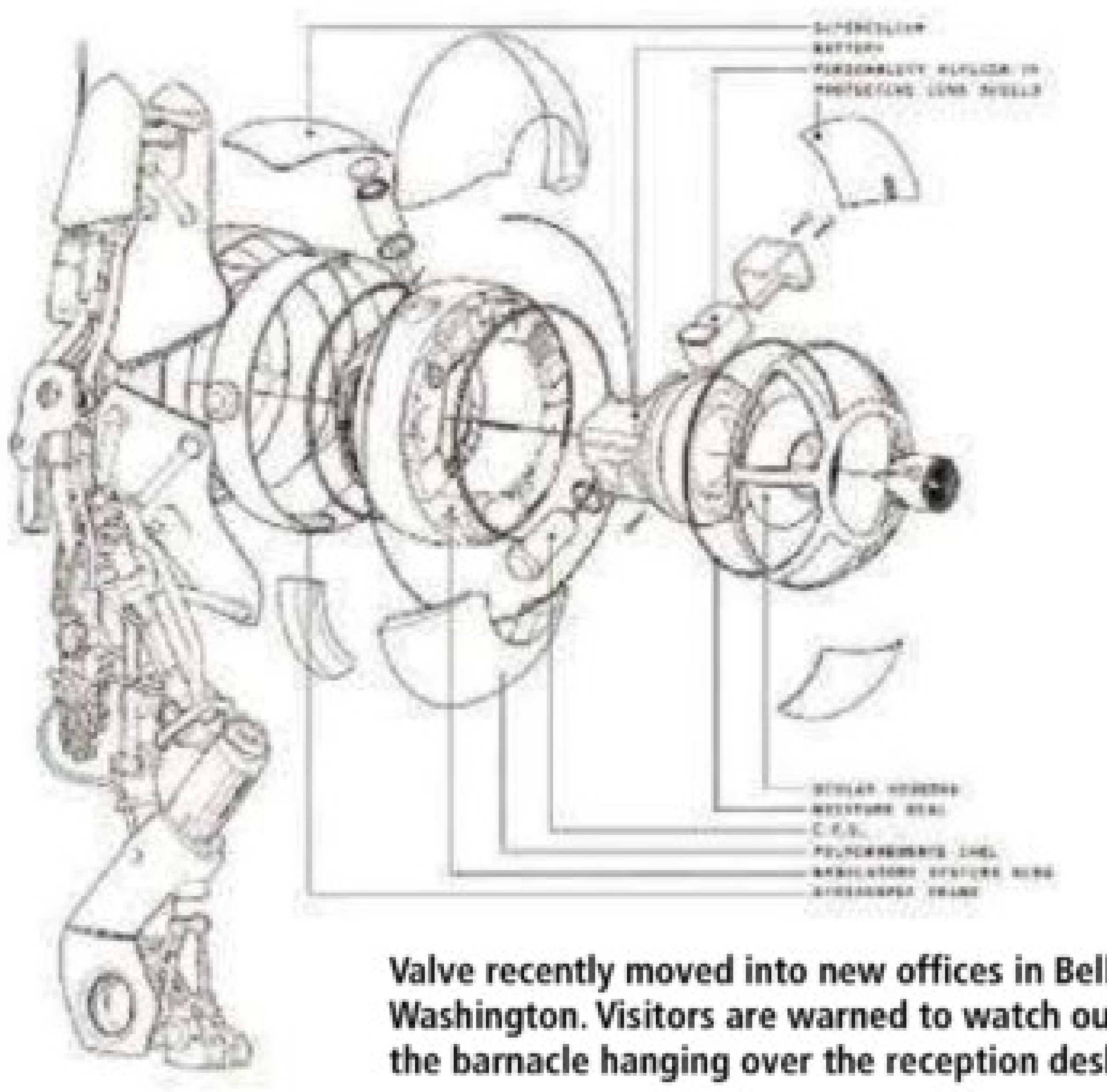
The success of *Portal* no doubt contributed to Valve's decision to repeat the trick of hiring an entire team straight from university, which it did after seeing another DigiPen project, *Tag: The Power Of Paint*, in 2008. The surface-property altering paints of *Tag* became a major new mechanic in *Portal 2*, in the form of Aperture Science's experimental gels.

"When we were looking to work on *Tag* after graduation we had thought about starting our own company and getting funding from a publisher," recalls *Portal 2* level designer and programmer **Tejeev Kohli**. "We didn't really know much about the business at the time and I'm certain that had we gone through with it, we would have failed miserably!"

Kohli goes on to echo Barnett's sentiment: "I would say that I have more freedom at Valve than I did when I was at DigiPen. At school I had five different classes a semester and had to do assignments for those, on top of working on the game project. At Valve I'm working on the game full-time and am making the decisions on what I want to work on."

Both teams were hired on the strength of the projects they'd already completed, an achievement Barnett and Kohli stress is essential for graduates looking to get





Valve recently moved into new offices in Bellevue, Washington. Visitors are warned to watch out for the barnacle hanging over the reception desk





noticed by established studios today. And, just like Kim Gordon rearranging the basslines of other bands' songs to create early Sonic Youth material, the easiest jumping-off point for creating a game is to change someone else's.

"Make a mod," advises Barnett. "You'll start past the bigger technical humps, have an established audience and learn a lot from the existing code. Plan for something that you can do with one or two people in a month – that way it only bloats to a year or so of work. Get it out there as soon as possible to collect feedback and iterate on your ideas. It's a great way to learn, get noticed and build a portfolio."

The increasing focus placed on user-generated content by developers eager to engage with their communities – from Media Molecule's commissioning of *LittleBigPlanet 2* community level pack Hansel & Gretelbot and RedLynx's inclusion of *Trials HD* players' tracks in its Big Thrills DLC, all the way up to the free CryEngine 3 SDK – ensures that there are more of those opportunities to get noticed than ever before.

"Play the games you like and identify things that could be improved upon, things that could be expanded upon," enthuses Kohli. "Then, try to make something that shows your process. Make a small Flash game or a mod – the easiest way to learn how to make games is to make them!

"I think it's great that there are so many new ways for people to make and play games. It can only be a good thing if more people play, and that in turn means that there are many more ways of getting into the industry." ■



DOUG LOMBARDI,
VP of marketing, Valve

What do you look for in potential recruits?
Original ideas, a strong work ethic and having shipped something are all among the leading factors we look for.

Is experience and portfolio all, or are formal qualifications equally as important?
Putting a label on formal qualifications is still somewhat problematic in this field. The person's work – be it a mod, student project, or professional work – is going to be the strongest draw.

What advantages are there to hiring straight from education?
We've hired individuals and now two 'teams' from DigiPen, and everyone seems to have a great mix of skills and a strong ability to bring something to completion. Having a good idea isn't the hard part; bringing that idea to life so others can experience it is the tricky bit.

How flexible are you in assigning responsibilities once you've hired an entire team?
Extremely. At Valve we let people make their own decisions about what they want to work on.

What advice would you give to those hoping to get into the game industry?
Find a way to contribute to a project that has a strong chance of actually shipping. Don't get caught up in your job title or role; the experience of shipping something is more important than having an important job on something that ultimately didn't matter.

Has digital distribution and UGC eroded the traditional routes into the industry?
I wasn't aware of any traditional routes! [Laughs.]

GRAND UNIFIED THEORY

How Unity Technologies' free development platform is inspiring a new generation of developers



DAVID HELGASON
CEO, Unity
unity3d.com

Just a year and a half ago, on the eve of Unity Technologies' announcement that it would be launching a free version of Unity, its game development platform, it had 13,000 users. Today, according to company CEO **David Helgason**, it boasts 450,000 developers.

The free version is aimed at students, hobbyists and small companies – the only requirement being that the company hasn't earned $100,000 in the previous year – and offers almost the same feature set as the pro version. More than that, it includes a commercial licence allowing developers to sell their work without having to pay any royalties to Unity Technologies. It's a surprisingly egalitarian business model for a company that has its own bottom line to consider.

"We just remembered when we were starting out," explains Helgason. "We actually started out as a game company, then morphed into a tools and technology company, and we just remembered how we couldn't afford anything on the market apart from GarageGames, which we didn't really like. So we had to build something ourselves! We wanted to help a lot of other people to be able to learn, because that's good for us, and it's good for the community."

> "We wanted to help a lot of other people to be able to learn, because that's good for us, and it's good for the community"

And this democratisation of game development is something Unity Technologies has been keen to catalyse since penning its first business plan back in 2004. While Helgason admits that what that plan had set out might not have made the best business sense, the tenet of making game development as accessible as possible has remained to this day.

"Before the free version, we had a $200 'indie' version – it seemed like a really low price point for people that are really committed to something like that," says Helgason. "But there are a lot of people in the world for whom $200 isn't a small amount at all, and a lot of students that can't really afford $200 out of their budget. And we don't think we're done yet – we're searching for a broader scope of democratisation."

One of the results of that search, the Asset Store, launched late last year and is providing yet another channel for keen developers to enter the industry and, importantly, make money from their efforts at the same time. While Unity is fully functional in its vanilla flavour, users can purchase modular plugins from the store, and many of these are being created by the Unity community.

"We've started seeing people who are effectively not making games, but spending a significant amount of their time building products for the Asset Store," Helgason enthuses. "And several people are making a living from this – we know, because we write the cheques to them. I think we'll see more and more of that over the next few months."

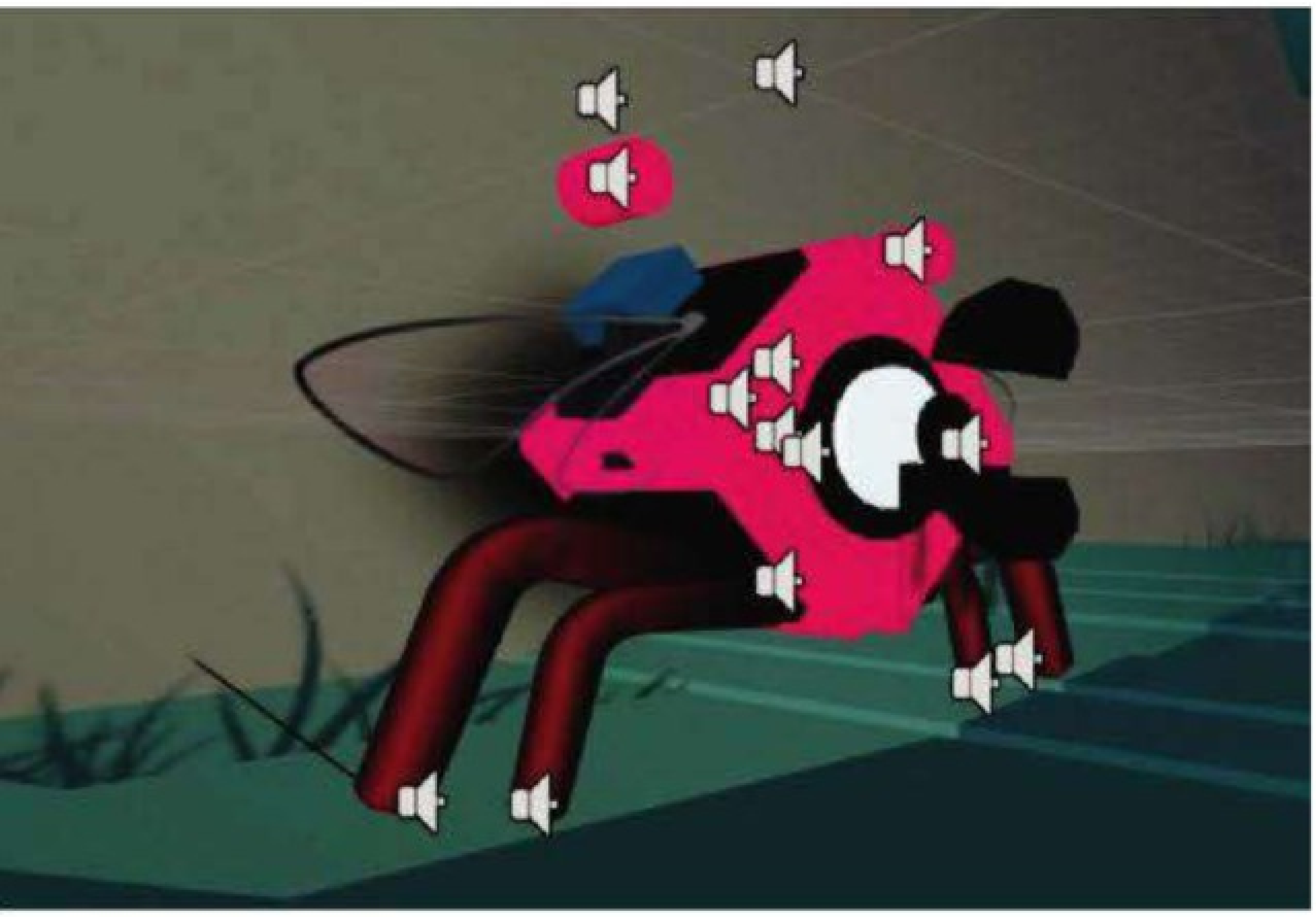
Unity Technologies takes a 30 per cent cut from the tools and plugins sold on the Asset Store which provides a useful additional revenue stream for the company. But Helgason hopes that the store will provide a significant revenue stream for plenty of developers, too, and is keen to explore other opportunities to support sellers in the future.

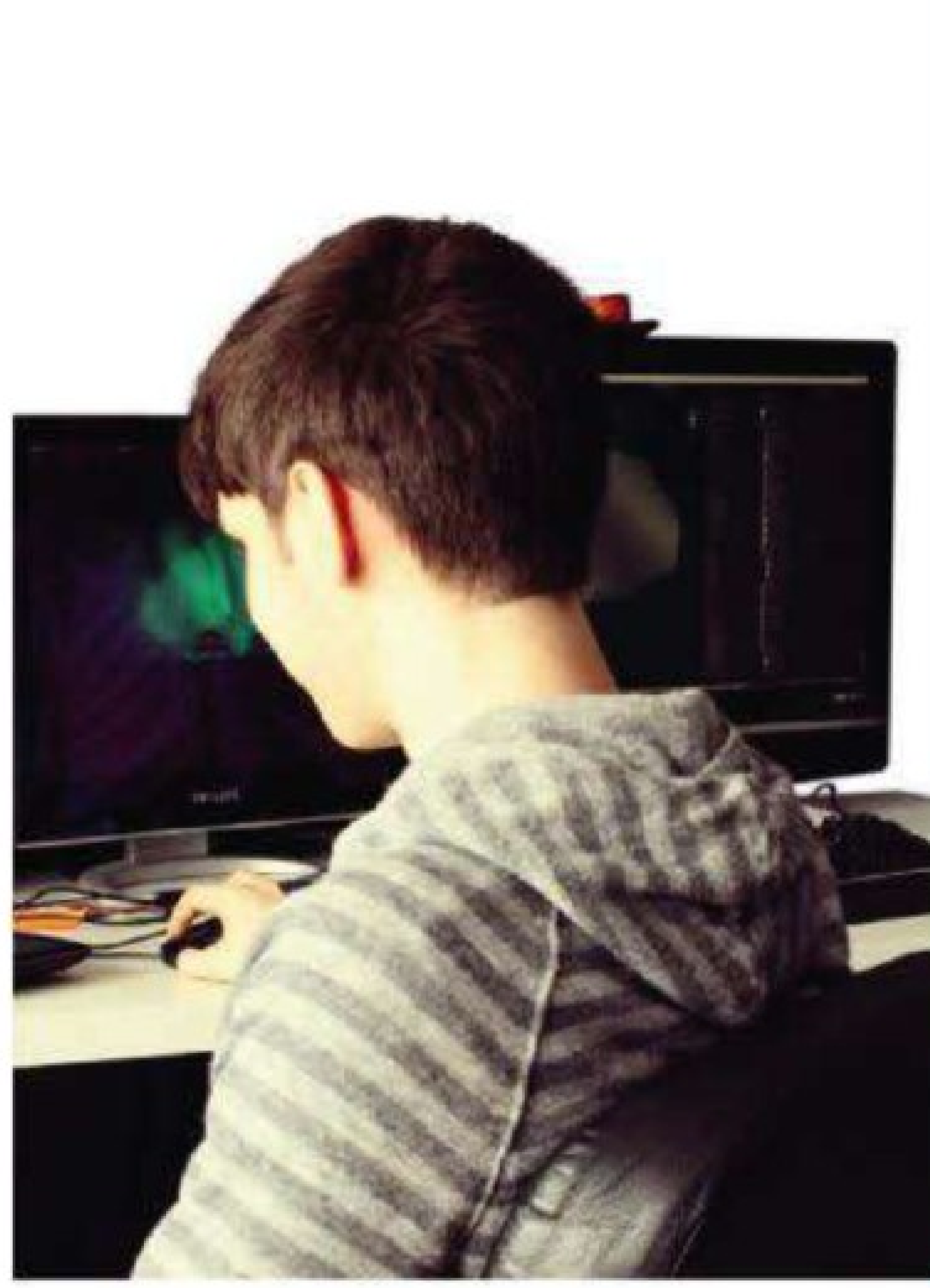
"We don't tend to turn a lot of stuff away because the main set of people involved are actually submitting some really good stuff. We use quite a lot of energy reviewing what goes in, and we want to help people pick good, rational

Unity's Ninja Camps offer an intensive week of problem solving and development during which developers can learn together











So confident were Woolven and Marino in their exploration puzzler *GLiD* that they dropped out of university. The decision was mostly vindicated by an Independent Games Festival prize, however

prices because it's hard to know what things should cost. Hopefully we'll eventually be able to offer larger libraries of things, and we're talking with several companies out there to explore that."

Back with game development, Unity Technologies' latest project aims to address the difficulties small teams and individuals face both in promoting themselves and striking deals with larger distributors. The idea behind Union is to gather developers into a larger group, in doing so providing a package of significantly greater value, while helping them to reach more of the available platforms that smaller teams might otherwise not have the resources to support. Union will provide porting and testing support while developers will see 80 per cent of the revenue generated.

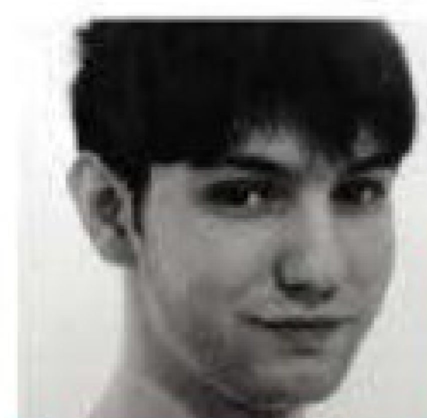
"It's a very light relationship – you don't lose any rights to your game, you can always pull it later if you decide that it's the wrong idea to have it there, and we don't promise you anything except that we're going to take care of [your game] and not break it or do anything stupid with it," explains Helgason. "There's an agreement that's kind of long – because it has to cover lots of different product areas – but it's essentially very simple. It's an attempt to help people get games out to more places."

But it is perhaps the ubiquity of Unity that is its biggest draw for those looking to get a leg up in the game industry. Simple enough to learn with, but powerful enough to create large-scale projects, it's fast becoming a recognised standard among studios looking for new recruits – so much so that the National Film and Television School is looking to include it as part of its Games Design and Development MA.

"Unity has become almost a common language in the production groups," Helgason claims. "The programmers understand it, the producers understand it, the audio people can use it and so on. It becomes a platform for these people to work together in, so it can get you rapidly up to speed and developing something, which is the only way to learn. That's pretty awesome, I think." ■







MATTHEW THOMAS WOOLVEN & MARCO MARINO

Creators of *GLiD*

How did *GLiD* come about?

Matthew Thomas Woolven It started off as a little experiment over the summer holidays with Unity, because I found out it was free.

Marco Marino We used to use Blender before that, but we didn't really have much experience. We got our hands on Unity and it felt really intuitive – you instantly pick it up.

MTW It started off as an exploration game – kind of like *Trials HD*, but set in a forest.

MM Yeah, we then added little features in, like a hovering feature so you could pull tricks in the air for a little longer. We decided to try to put a grappling hook in, but it glitched out and allowed the player to make multiple grapple hooks. That gave us the idea for the web, so it evolved from there.

What does Unity mean for developers trying to break into the industry?

MM The fact they've made it free has made it kind of accessible to anybody that has a computer and some basic knowledge. I mean, neither of us really had any coding knowledge before Unity, so it's taught us, basically.

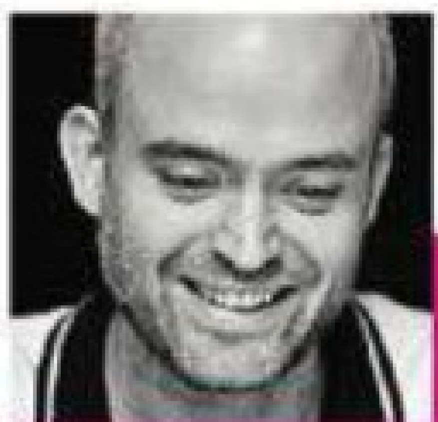
MTW Yeah. Also, being able to just hit the play button and try your game, that's insanely helpful. As well as being able to export it as a .exe in one click. That gives you a lot of confidence to just show it to people and send it around.

So does Unity offer a more relaxed approach to game development from your perspective?

MM Definitely, yeah. It's a really undaunting process, working with Unity. You can piss about with it. Something good will usually happen, and you don't have to worry about breaking a piece of code because it's all split up into tiny descriptors. You can really have fun with it, and it doesn't matter.

UPWARDLY MOBILE

Four iOS developers explain how they used modern portable platforms to find success in game development



SIMON OLIVER
Handcircus
Rolando, Rolando 2, Okabu

How has iOS changed development?
It's had an enormous impact – the full extent of which is still being felt. As a developer, there has been a staggering increase in the number of ways that you can distribute your game – you're almost spoiled for choice. The increase in digital channels has been accompanied with a major lowering of barriers – both of which are awesome for individuals and small teams that have a great idea and want to get it into as many players as possible. I'm sure there are many people out there that might be struggling to break into the industry, just as I did, but now have a wide range of outlets for all of their ideas.

How has the success of *Rolando* and *Rolando 2* changed the way you work?
It's really been a dream come true – allowing me to change the way that I'm involved in game creation from being a part-time hobbyist developer, into running my own small studio and fund development of our new PlayStation 3 title *Okabu*. It's also allowed us to move into self-publishing.

What advice would you give to people looking to get into mobile development?
The most important thing is to get making – chances are, your first game isn't going to be the one that makes you a million dollars, but the process of creating a simple game provides an extremely valuable experience. I've made all manner of small games and prototypes that failed miserably, but each failure provided a number of insights into different aspects of creating a game.

What's key to a successful mobile game?
Polish, personality and accessibility are all key. There's so much competition in the App Store now – for a game to do well it needs to grab your attention the moment you launch it, and needs to deliver an experience that is unique, fun, easy to get into and a joy to interact with. Taking the extra time to really polish and add detail will pay huge dividends. If you look at recent successes, like *Tiny Wings*, they *ooze* personality: from the character illustrations, to the music, audio and touches such as particle effects.





Okabu (PS3) retains Handcircus's iOS games' charm



"I tried the iPhone for a few seconds and the whole touch interface was just perfect"



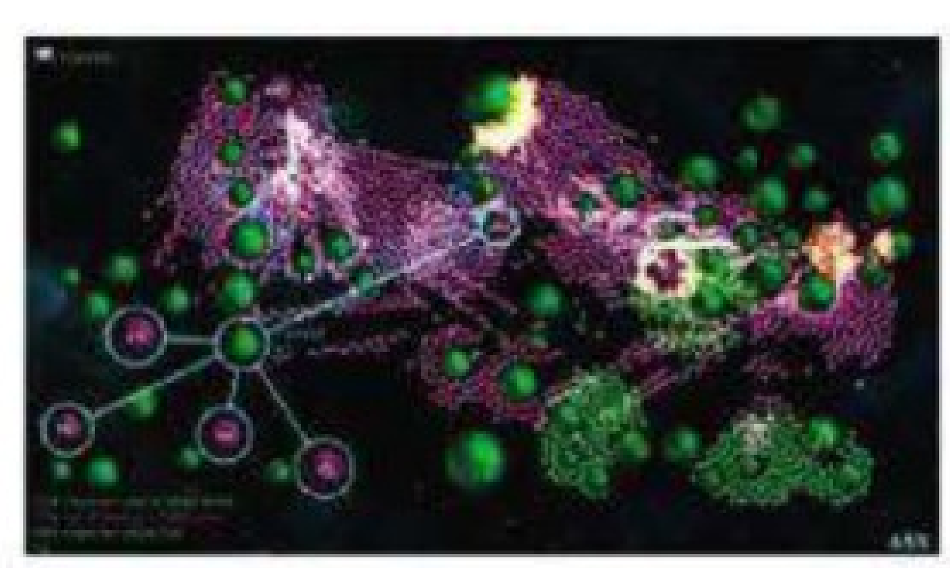


PHIL HASSEY
Indie developer
Galcon, Galcon Labs, Beast

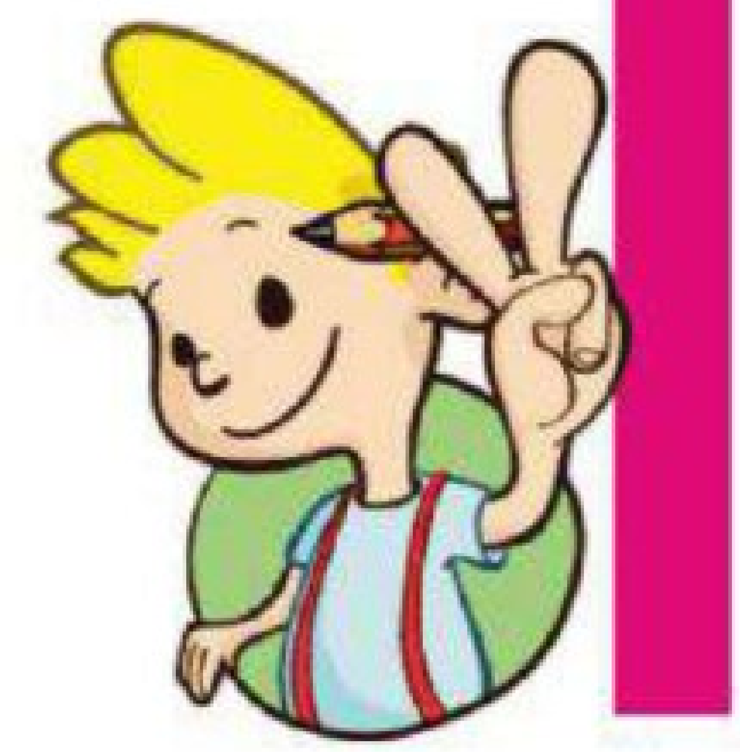
What was the inspiration for creating *Galcon*?
Galcon was actually prototyped about five years ago in a 48-hour Ludum Dare game jam, and I think it was pretty much the winning entry across the board. I was actually doing healthcare consulting and web application development at that time, and one of the full-time indie developers suggested to me that the game looked like it was good enough to go ahead and sell. So at that point I started to develop it as a piece of desktop shareware. Then, about three years ago, I was at a Python developer's conference and someone showed me their iPhone – this was before there even was an App Store – I tried it for a few seconds and the whole touch interface was just perfect. So I was still doing all the healthcare stuff, but I signed up for the development kit and got myself an iPod Touch, and then managed to release *Galcon* on the iPhone.

***Galcon* came pretty early in the App Store's life – do you think its success could still be repeated today?**
I think it would definitely be more challenging to get that initial breakthrough if I did it today. If you follow iPhone gaming news sites, there's still a lot of coverage on these gems out there, but there are so few that are really doing something truly unique. Adapting your game to take advantage of the newer Apple technologies is a good way to get attention, because you might be the first game that used this or that technology.

What about the challenge of promoting yourself and your game?
I think word of mouth still gets things out there, and one of the key things is always getting your game reviewed on the various iPhone review sites. There are PR companies that can help do that sort of thing, and some people have used those to great success, but I know people who've used them and haven't really seen any difference. It seems like it's pretty straightforward. You just need to send out the information to the reviewers, and hope that they like it! If you give them a game that's boring, they probably won't.



Galcon attempts to update the mechanics of Risk





MATT RIX
Indie developer
Trainyard, *Trainyard Express*

Why did you decide to make *Trainyard*?
I don't know how long it's been, but I was working at a company doing Flash jobs and things like that, and I decided that I wanted to make a game in my spare time – where I could find it! So every day on my commute I would just work on games ideas on my laptop.

On the train…
Working on *Trainyard* on the train, yep, I know! [Laughs.] I developed it over the course of a year in my spare time. I mean, there were periods of time where for a couple of months I just didn't have enough time to work on it. It was released June 2010.

But the sales of *Trainyard* allowed you to quit your job?
Yeah. The time it did best was in October 2010 – it was number two on the App Store for a few days. Now it's definitely made enough that I can work full-time on games.

Why did you choose iOS over Android?
If someone were to ask me which to go into, I would say 100 per cent iOS over Android. The number of users is probably greater on Android, but the number of *paying* users is way more on iOS. So if you want to make a paid game, that's the definite way to go. And on Android the big problem is fragmentation. On iOS you've got maybe five or six different devices you have to support at most, whereas on Android you have literally hundreds of combinations of screen sizes and different buttons in different places. As an indie developer, you can't support that.



Were you ever disappointed that your game *Trainyard* didn't make you one of the iOS overnight millionaires?
For me, and this is a really important thing, the whole reason I made *Trainyard* wasn't to make lots of money, it was just because I wanted to make a really good game. I think that's a really key thing. You see so many games that people try to get into the App Store, and they're approaching it for the wrong reasons – just to strike it rich, or to cash in on some idea – and I think it really shows most of the time.

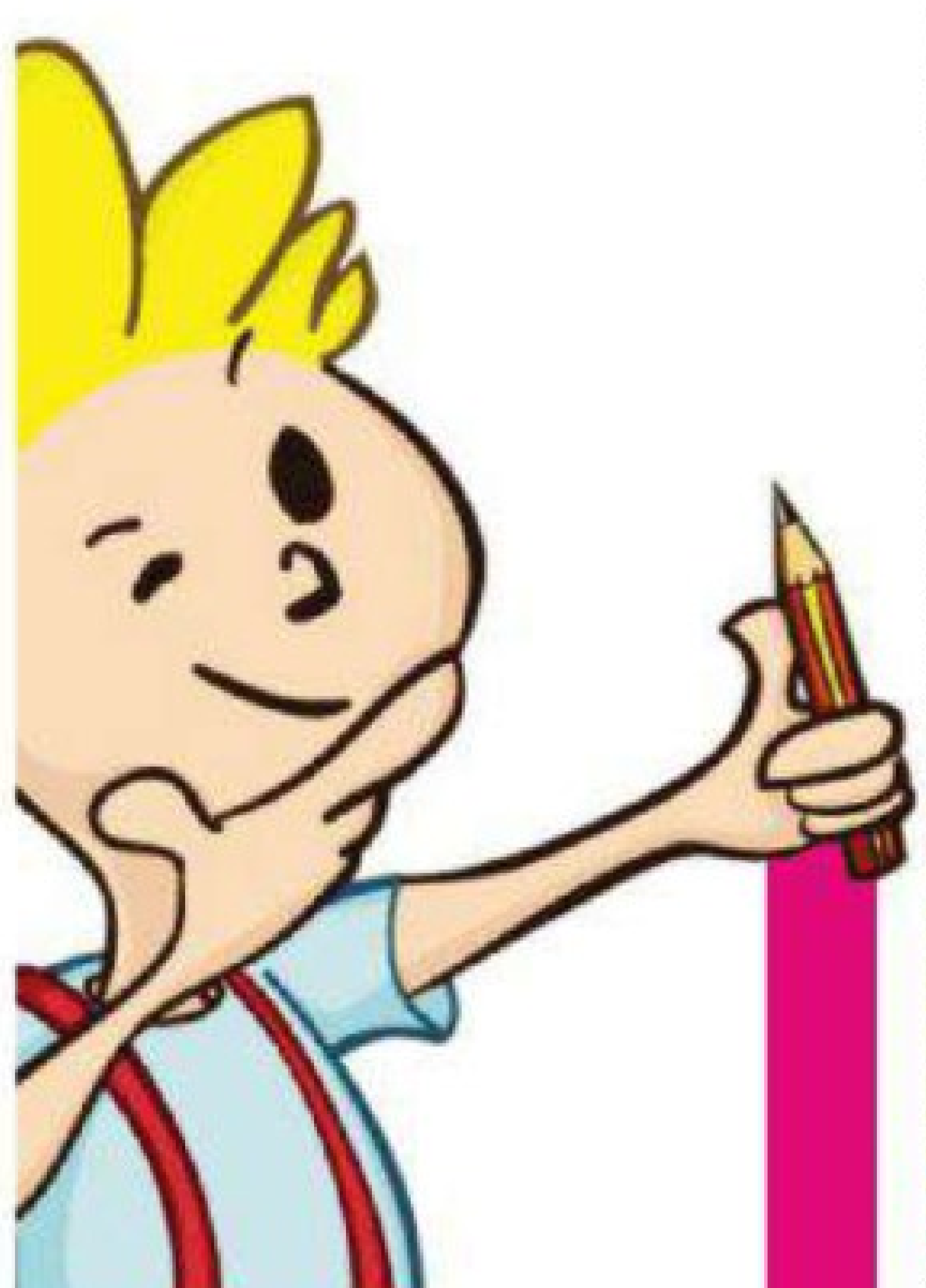


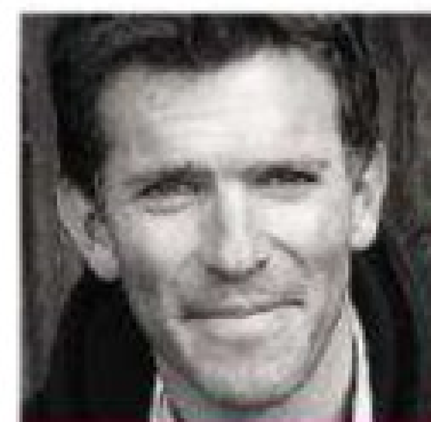


Trainyard is simple at first, but soon gets devious



"The process of creating a game provides an extremely valuable experience"





NOEL LLOPIS
Indie developer
Flower Garden, *Casey's Contraptions*

How did you get into iOS development?
I cut my teeth on an Amstrad CPC with BASIC and assembly language. All through high school and college, I made games as a hobby, and in the late '90s I started working for a developer making console games. A few years ago I quit my job to go indie. It's a dream come true for me.

Do you think the relative ease of getting a game on the App Store has changed development for the better?
The lower barrier of entry means there are lots of really bad games out there, but it also means that there are lots of great games that wouldn't have been made otherwise. It's not just easy for someone to make a game; it's easier than before to make a great game with just one or two people. Between the iPhone, iPad and their development tools, we now take things for granted that would have taken a very large team to do years ago. It's really empowering.

Have you been approached by any publishers since *Flower Garden* became available?
I've had some enquiries, but nothing serious. Once the game is out, it makes no sense to get a publisher. Even before it's out, on the iPhone, with small budgets and turnaround times, there really isn't that much need for a publisher. It's not like they put your game in a box in the store any more.

What other opportunities does iOS development present?
IOS makes games based on microtransactions, or free with advertisements, much easier to create. I can't emphasise enough how important microtransactions – with possibly even a free game – are today.

What advice would you give to people looking to get into iOS development?
Read as much as you can about other people's experiences and learn from that. Reach out to other developers; the community is awesome and you'll get lots of help and support from them. And finally, count on spending as much effort after you're done developing the game on PR as you did making the game itself!



Casey's Contraptions appeals to the engineer in us all

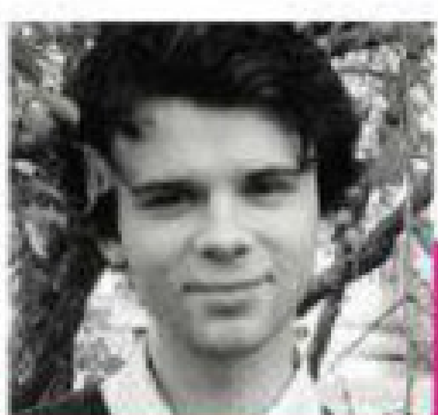
CENTRE FOR DIGITAL ENTERTAINMENT

A doctorate that offers an inside view of the industry as you learn



PHIL WILLIS
Director of centre
www.digital-entertainment.org

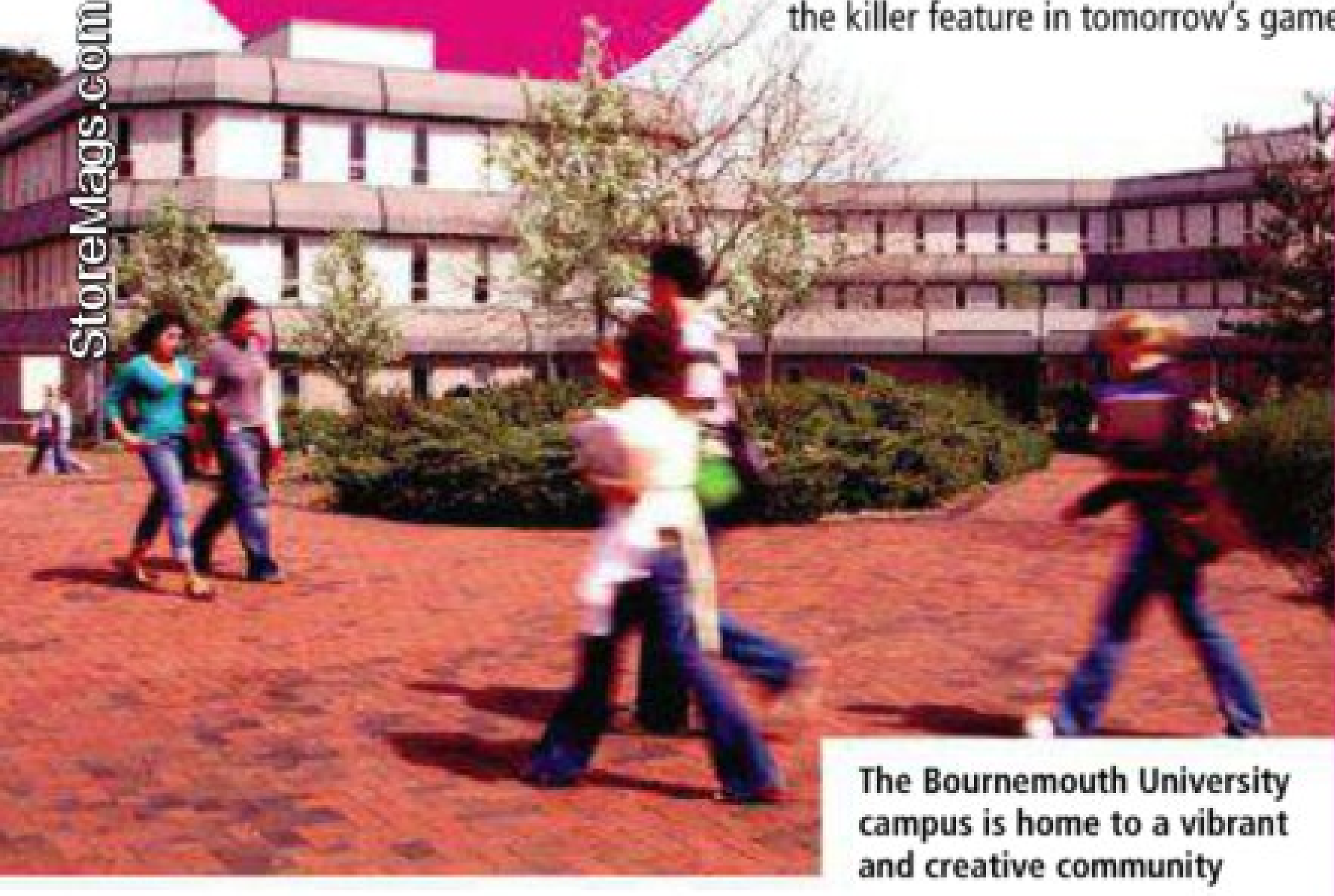
The Centre for Digital Entertainment is a collaborative doctoral programme that encompasses the University of Bath, Bournemouth University and a broad range of industry partners who take on students for the majority of their research projects. It's an interesting setup that sees those learning becoming a functioning part of the industry almost immediately, while providing developers with the resources they need to further their own R&D. Here, the centre's director, Professor **Phil Willis**, discusses the benefits of direct industry experience, keeping in tune with the fast-moving game sector, and the unique opportunities presented by a research course such as this one.



CHRIS LEWIN
Current CDE research engineer, Electronic Arts

"The EngD programme was an attractive alternative to a regular doctorate for me because it offered engagement in subjects and industries that wouldn't be possible in a standard PhD. I'm based in the internal physics engine team at Electronic Arts, whose work ranges from physically enhanced animation to cloth and soft bodies.

"I'm currently working on rigid body fracturing and procedural destruction, although I expect I'll move into other interesting areas in due course. My experience so far has been great, and I'm looking forward to developing technology that could be the killer feature in tomorrow's games."



The Bournemouth University campus is home to a vibrant and creative community



Work by Goncalo Cabaca, studying MA Digital Effects at Bournemouth University

What are the advantages of research projects for students and developers?
We try to put each research project into a context relevant to the university, and find an academic supervisor for it, but it's the companies who are saying where they want the research. When they come to us, they don't sign anything at that stage; we wait until we've got a student, and only then is there any kind of firm signing-up process to make sure the student is properly looked after. It's very good value from the companies' point of view: they only pay a little, plus there's a chance to recruit highly skilled employees from the centre. So it's a win all around.

Is there ever any risk that placement positions won't exist?
We face that danger by doing things the other way round; we don't make an offer to the student until there's a company. Even though they may be doing a year's tuition here, we do the deal first. We prefer to get the dating game out of the way first so we've got a marriage! It means students get that first year to learn about the company without necessarily being in it. But we've also got some students who went into the company first, spent a year there, and then came back to university. So there's that degree of flexibility.

Does this system allow you to keep more in step with the needs of the industry?
It does. We were aware of that when we first started to put the proposal together, so instead of doing the usual thing – writing a proposal and getting developers to read it – we talked to the companies and asked: "What will work? What are the problems with the current courses?" As a result, we've got a system that puts students into a company rather than spending two or three years in a university, then finding that they're not quite as savvy as they thought.

Do you take advantage of potential cross-pollination between your various industry partners? For instance, visual effects companies and game developers.
Absolutely. We regularly bring together our student cohort with all company and university supervisors. It's the overall mix of exposure students get here: they see what university research is about, and also see what companies are about, and what they research. We also send them along to other courses and events which aren't formally part of what they do, to help them. This year a bunch of us will be going to Siggraph to sit in on the courses, and there'll be a chance to network with some of the 30,000 attendees. It's not an opportunity students would get on a normal course. ■

SAE INSTITUTE AND QANTM

A school founded to teach audio engineering in the '70s that now has an international game design reach



BARBARA SKODA
Vienna school manager
www.sae.edu



The School of Audio Engineering was founded in 1976 and introduced a previously unheard of focus on hands-on learning. It now spans 55 colleges across 26 countries and, since the turn of the millennium, includes a number of Qantm colleges in Europe and Australia. Its game design degree sees students specialise in either programming or animation and graphics, with both branches learning about development and design within the context of their focus. We speak to school manager **Barbara Skoda** about the international reach of the school, what effect mobile development is having on courses and the increasing importance of thirdparty tool knowledge.



Emphasis is placed on access to optimal kit and software for practical exercises and projects



How have the school's founding principles affected your courses?
All these courses are very hands-on, very practically oriented, which means we have a limited number of in-class hours which cover an all-round view of the topic for the specific programme. So if you take the programming course you have basic object oriented programming with C++, C#. Students won't learn how to program a game engine from zero, but how to use the languages and engines like CryEngine and Unity 3D to really make proper games. Our programming curriculum also includes stuff like Actionscript 3 and mobile application development.


Is there a shift towards a focus on engines rather than low-level coding?
I think so, because if you look at the game market itself the triple-A market is breaking down, and a lot of smaller companies are appearing. They don't have the capacity to have a department that builds engines from scratch, so they use thirdparty engines. And so what they need is people who know how to use those tools.

"Students won't learn how to program a game engine from zero, but how to use the languages and engines like CryEngine"

How has the rise of the smartphone affected students' perception of game development?
It actually makes it easier to approach the games, and it makes it more attractive to youngsters. What I see a lot of when students come here is that they're actually scared of the programming part, but seeing that so many small companies do little iOS or Android games, and finding out that you can use tools which are more approachable than hardcore C++ programming takes away a bit of the fear that people have. It's making it easier to ease them in.

How do you keep your courses relevant to the industry?
That's one of the strengths of SAE, because we have a very condensed programme. You can do the bachelor's in 24 months here, and on top of that we have an extremely close relationship with the industry and are able, within our boundaries, to change or update our curriculum constantly. We're flexible in that respect, which is something that a private school like SAE can do much more easily than any state-run university. We have to, because that is extremely important.

Does having such a wide international reach allow SAE and Qantm to instil a more holistic view of the industry in its students?
Absolutely. The internationality of SAE, with so many different locations and outlooks, is really one of the top points that we have. We have a board which consists of people from all over Europe who constantly work on our curriculums, for example. I get input from the guy in Barcelona, and from Vienna, and from Berlin, Amsterdam and Paris. All of the influences from those countries direct us. Students can also change from one place to another without much hassle. Our courses are done in two steps: a diploma part in the beginning and then a degree part. So it's easy to spend your first 12 months in London and the second 12 in, say, Berlin. The student gets to know the industry in London and Berlin and has an international skill from the beginning. ■



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ENJMIN

A French school created at the request of a game industry that remains closely entwined with its progress



STEPHANE NATKIN
School director
www.enjmin.fr

Enjmin was founded in 2001 and is based in Angoulême, a city in the south west of France. It offers a two-year Masters degree in Games and Interactive Media as well as PhD research programmes in Game Design, Interaction Design, Sound Design, and Ubiquitous Game and Ambient Intelligence. The school is part of the Conservatory of Arts and Trades (CNAM) and is in partnership with the Universities of La Rochelle and Poitiers as well as a long list of companies in the audiovisual and game sectors. School director **Stephane Natkin** talks us through the benefits of France's generous student subsidies, the school's close ties with the industry, and funding graduate startups.

What can Enjmin offer foreign students?
The main thing is that it's 400 euros per year, compared to 30,000 euros somewhere else! [Laughs.] The school is recognised all around the world, and we have graduates in studios across the globe, and I would say we are the best school in France, and maybe the best in Europe, so it's a great way to get an MA in a nice place, for a low price!

How did you get your domestic and international industry connections?
The school was created in response to a request from the industry. In 2005, the two main trade unions in France went to see the prime minister asking for a plan for the game industry. In that plan was the creation of Enjmin, so right from the beginning we had the industry behind us.

We decided at the beginning that the development project that students undertake should be judged by a panel made of publishers from all around the world, and the president of the panel is always someone well known like, for instance, Jordan Mechner. They visit three or four times during the year to see how the project is emerging and this creates a snowball effect as the projects get discussed outside of the school.

So Enjmin offers an opportunity for game industry exposure.
Absolutely. We have two people managing each speciality, one from the university and one from the industry – it's important that students work with people from the industry, not just academics. The school is also connected to several research labs, and we have a lot of projects in which we are directly involved with the industry – some are funded by it, some funded by the government. For example, we recently had a project with Quantic Dream about making more interesting dialogue for player characters.

How do your 'upskilling' and retraining courses benefit students?
In France, you can get a degree validated by what you have learned through your life. You have to spend time showing that you have the competencies required, and it's certainly not easy. So we have people working on these, including some people from EA in the US – people who need a formal diploma at this point in their career.

Secondly, there are many people who have five to six years of practical experience, but aren't really working in the field of games despite wanting to. They come to us for six months and can then get into the industry through their expertise.

> "We have a lot of projects in which we are directly involved with the industry – some are funded by it, some by the government"

How do Enjmin's startup grants and game production financing work?
The reason students only pay 400 euros is because we receive one half of our course funding from the government and the other half from the region where we are located. One big goal of the region is to help the creation of new game companies and develop the industry. Because of that, when some students want to create their own company, we try to give them advice and help them. We have people in the school who can give them the tools they need, and we provide courses in project management and starting companies. Often, our students start from the project they were working on at the school. ■





Enjmin's striking surroundings (right) in the Angoulême region of France



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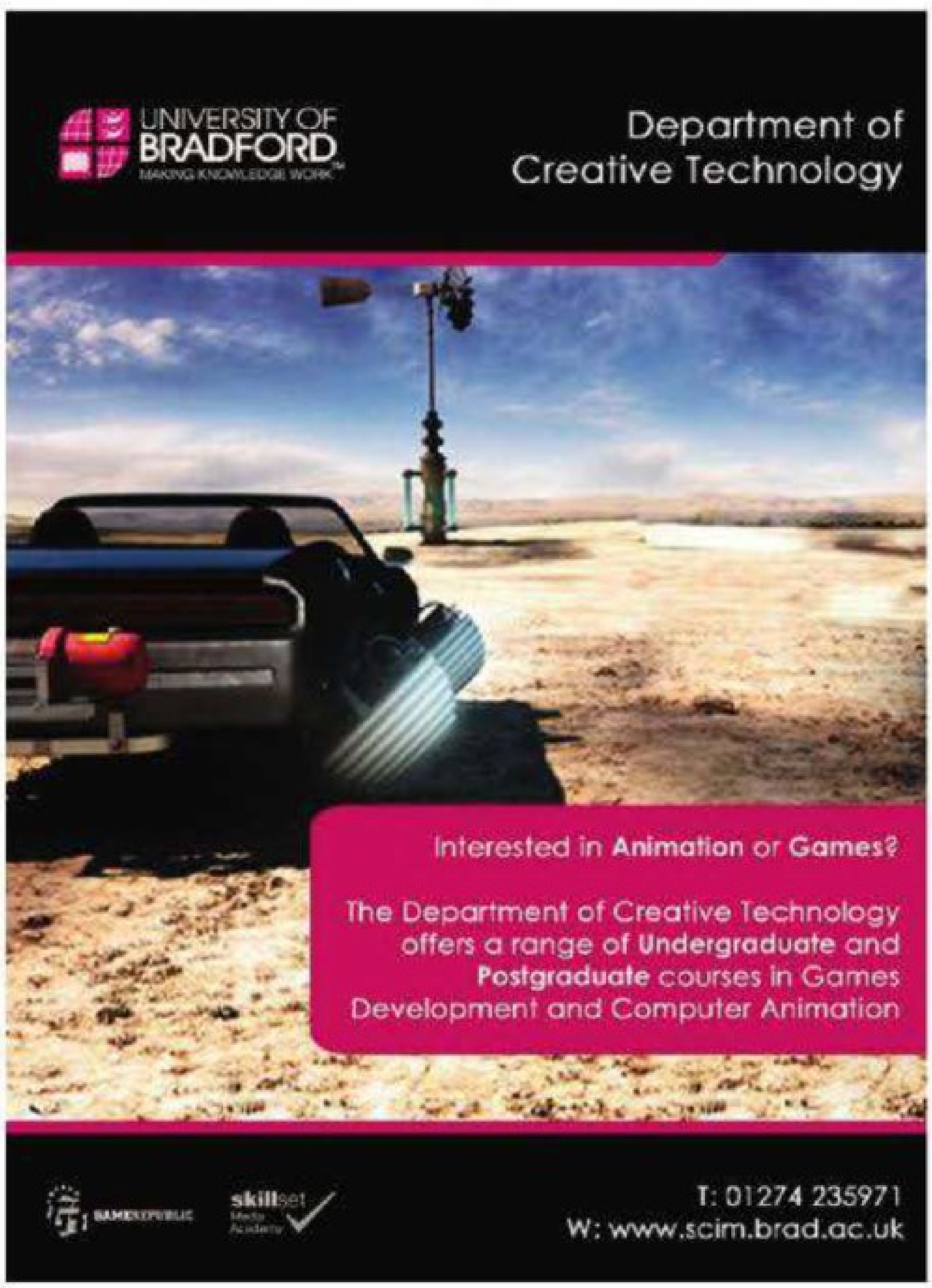
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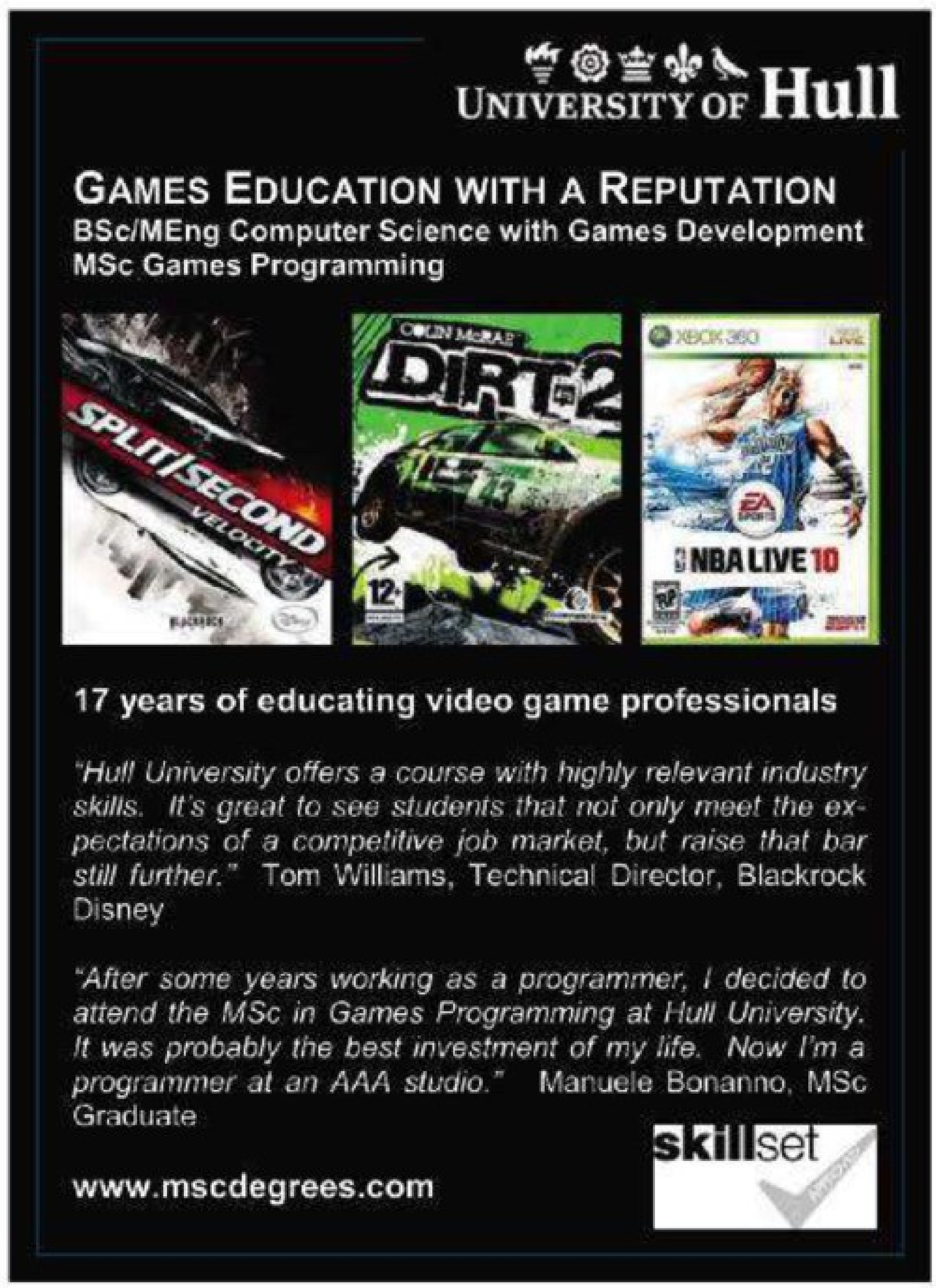


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